

# *The Wallace Stevens Journal*



25th Anniversary Issue  
International Perspectives on Wallace Stevens

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International Perspectives on Wallace Stevens  
Edited by Bart Eeckhout  
Ghent University, Belgium

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## Preface: (Re)Globalizing Stevens

BART EECKHOUT

**L**OOKING BACK ON FOUR decades' worth of poems, the 74-year-old Wallace Stevens cast himself in the role of contented Ariel to tell us how

It was not important that they survive.  
What mattered was that they should bear  
Some lineament or character,

Some affluence, if only half-perceived,  
In the poverty of their words,  
Of the planet of which they were part. (*CP* 532–33)

Poems were “parts of a world,” as Stevens already affirmed in the title of his 1942 collection, but his programmatic pluralism and defense of abstraction in those years still inspired him to use only the indefinite and more general designation, “a world.” Toward the end of his life, by contrast, in the lines quoted above, he modulated this phrase resolutely into “the planet” of which we are all part and that he sought to miniaturize in the form of “The Planet on the Table.” Typically, his affirmation at this later date came couched in a language oscillating between inflating and deflating gestures, mixing at very close range the search for “lineament,” “character,” and even the “affluence” of our entire “planet,” with the modifiers “some,” “if only half-perceived,” and “in the poverty of their words.” By the end of his life, Stevens was a planetary poet of the most humble ambition and the most ambitious humility.

For reasons that can be summarized most succinctly as a paradigm shift toward historicist approaches in the humanities since the early 1980s, Stevens has nevertheless come to seem more and more an American poet speaking to an American audience. After the era of phenomenological, deconstructionist, and other principally philosophical readings, his work was reread especially from a biographical point of view and situated in various sociopolitical, artistic, and literary-sociological contexts. The often revelatory and always useful contextualizations offered by critics like Alan Filreis, James Longenbach, Glen MacLeod, Milton Bates, Frank

Lentricchia, Robin Schulze, Angus Cleghorn, or John Timberman Newcomb have taught us a lot about the specific American locale and cultural environment within which Stevens lived, wrote, and came to be canonized. In addition, some of the older celebrity critics whose interest remained with more formal, psychological, or intertextual readings (like Helen Vendler, Harold Bloom, or Richard Poirier) have proven no less zealous in reinforcing our sense of the intrinsic Americanness of Stevens. The overall quality of the body of criticism that was thus produced over the past twenty to twenty-five years has been extraordinary, but as Stephen Matterson argues in the intentionally provocative and sweeping essay with which this special issue opens, it may be time again to restore some of that other Stevens: Stevens the international poet who struggled with his own Americanness; the glocalist *avant la lettre*, who pondered the fate of "Lions in Sweden" and delighted in "compound[ing] the imagination's Latin with / The lingua franca et jocundissima" (CP 397).

At a moment in history when globalization and its (dis)contents are quickly becoming the hot topic of the day, even within the humanities, the time may be ripe to branch out again and conclude this twenty-fifth anniversary year of *The Wallace Stevens Journal* by proposing a number of "International Perspectives on Wallace Stevens." A special issue of *PMLA* published earlier this year, in January 2001, and devoted to the topic of "Globalizing Literary Studies," marks the timeliness of this interest. Indeed, if one of the leading contributors to that special issue, Edward W. Said, is right in claiming that today "The notion neither of author, nor of work, nor of nation is as dependable as it once was, and for that matter the role of imagination, which used to be a central one, along with that of identity has undergone a Copernican transformation in the common understanding of it" (Said 64–65), then Wallace Stevens may not altogether be the most unrewarding poet to come up for reconsideration. After all, his work always revolved around questions of "imagination" and "transformation," and his critics have sufficiently demonstrated its interest in matters of "identity" (whether American, New England, or Pennsylvania Dutch) to promise us new vistas and insights also from a less national, regional, or local perspective. Still according to Said, the "aggressive subspecialties" that have emerged in the study of literature at North American universities have made "one major casualty, which is the sense of a collective human history" (68). It may be time, then, to readdress the following question, so Stevensian in its resonance: "Can one formulate a theory of connection between part and whole that denies neither the specificity of the individual experience nor the validity of a projected, putative, or imputed whole?" (68).

To Said, this is an open question, and Giles Gunn, elsewhere in the same issue of *PMLA*, proposes to tackle it in a spirit of "mutual interrogation" (Gunn 18). This is the spirit also in which the current issue of *The Wallace Stevens Journal* has been compiled: not so much with the self-congratula-

tory purpose of uncovering counter-neocolonial reflexes in Stevens or with the surreptitious aim of restoring the hegemony of a white male Eurocentric tradition to which he at least partly belongs, but with the intention of questioning his and our representations of various national and cultural identities. This implies a constant two-way traffic in which our conceptions of both the indigenous and the foreign, both self and other, are reassessed.

What might it mean, for instance, as an American professor to teach Stevens' poetry in China to Chinese students? (One answer, which might sound surprising, is that these students are in some sense better equipped to read Stevens than their fellow Americans.) Conversely, how does one go about arguing for a Buddhist sensibility in this poet's work without either courting Western incomprehension or lapsing into an idealized form of Orientalism? (One could perhaps marshal testimonies by postmodernist artists or else propose to look at some paintings from Chan art.) How does one present the difficulties with which French readers of Stevens grapple without simply confirming stereotypes that foreigners have about the French? (One will have to explain at least the alienating differences between French and American poetic traditions, their incompatible topics and language, the different cultural status of religious polemics in either country, or the dissonance produced by words like "imagination" and "fiction.") How welcoming are American readers to the argument that one of Stevens' most formative experiences actually took place in Canada? (It may help to point to the role of sublime mountainscapes and wild animals in the poetry.) And are there any structural reasons, not based on simple cultural prejudice, why the British should remain so little responsive to Stevens? (Try clarifying the organization of academic departments in the United Kingdom and how it leads this poet to be snowed under or tends to make readers tone-deaf to his work.)

Whatever globalizing literary studies may involve—and much of it will require our constant critical skepticism—it is clear that the phenomenon of globalization itself, in the cultural and symbolic realm no less than in the economic and financial sphere, is here to stay. "The challenge for students of the humanities," writes Gunn, "is not to decide whether globalization deserves to be taken seriously but how best to engage it critically" (21). And Gunn knows what he is talking about, since he belongs to that striking and most recent academic species called "professor of English and of global and international studies." (He teaches not coincidentally in multi-ethnic California.) We still need to wait and see to what extent "global literary studies" will serve especially the aims of an American intellectual class striving or pretending to speak for a global community of literary scholars (Baucom 169), but that such a community is increasingly taking shape is undeniable.

Take, at the most banal anecdotal level, the way in which this special issue has been put together: somewhere in the virtual space between upstate New York, where the journal's headquarters are located, and the trans-

atlantic nerve center in Belgian Ghent, and with a constant *va-et-vient* of well over 600 e-mails and a few ancient-type letters to and from Japan, China, Argentina, Canada, England, Ireland, Scotland, Sweden, Germany, Poland, Switzerland, France, Italy, Portugal, Greece, Turkey, and some dozen states in the United States. Or take, as further evidence of the globalization of the Stevens industry, the recent multiplication of Ph.D. dissertations and books on this poet in Europe alone: at least four of their authors are represented in the ensuing pages, but several others (like Alain Suberchicot in France, Lee Jenkins in Ireland, Tony Sharpe in England, Beverly Maeder in Switzerland) are not. Needless to add, for a difficult poet who demands extended, concentrated study, Stevens only stands to benefit from this kind of ongoing cultural globalization, this World Wide Web of aficionados woven on the farthest fringes of a globalizing economy.

The opportunities for investigation, in fact, remain multiple, as the sheer size of this issue (among the heftiest ever of the journal) demonstrates. What the interested reader will find in the following pages is diverse and methodologically wide-ranging: not only examples of straightforward biographical analysis and further archival research (always welcome), nor simply a number of influence studies (with regard to contemporary as well as later writers) or reception studies (for different countries and cultures), but also analyses from a linguistic point of view or within the field of aesthetic theory, as well as stories about teaching or about the art of translation. One of the latter stories is allowed to wrap up the section of essays, thereby building a smooth transition to a brief collection of actual recent translations of Stevens—a collection that invites readers to brush up on their knowledge of French, Spanish, Italian, Romagnolo (say what?), German, even Dutch, Polish, and, why not, Japanese. These extra pages, a tongue-twister's paradise and a proofreader's hell prepared with a monk's patience by John Serio, may serve not only as conclusive evidence of Stevens' growing global appeal but also as the icing on the anniversary cake of this journal wholly devoted to his art.

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# “The Whole Habit of the Mind”: Stevens, Americanness, and the Use of Elsewhere

STEPHEN MATTERSON

## I

WHEN ASKED IN THE *Twentieth Century Verse* questionnaire, “Do you regard yourself as part of the ‘American tradition’ . . . or as a poet simply, dissociated from nationality?” Stevens responded, “I should not say that I was flagrantly American, but I hope that I am American” (OP 308). The response seems unremarkable to us now. After all, Stevens was a poet who believed very much in the need for the nation’s things to represent that nation, who wanted Cuba to be “full of Cuban things” (L 495), the gods of China to be Chinese (OP 263), and was surprised that sausages were sold in Ireland because they seemed insufficiently Celtic (L 616). In addition, he responded to the 1939 *Partisan Review* questionnaire that Americanness was something natural, unassumed: “An American has to be an American because there is nothing else for him to be” (OP 310). The *Twentieth Century Verse* response seems unremarkable to us today also because very few poets seem more American to us than Stevens. He has come to appear to us as the fulfillment of Whitman’s Adamic aspiration for the American writer, a maker whose work arises out of engagement with a particular landscape and who inscribes the self-consciousness of his making. He has his own unmistakable voice as a determined inhabitant of the American soil.

But there is something about the questionnaire responses that suggests insecurity about his own Americanness. It is clear that Stevens saw a distinction between being an American and being an American poet. He could not take for granted his status as an American poet, any more than he could assume that Cuban things were truly of Cuba or that sausages were not enjoyed in Ireland. “I hope that I am American” was the strikingly cautious formulation in Stevens’ response, more cautious even when one places it alongside the 1939 response.

This caution, this insecurity, the difference between naturally being something and hoping that you are, has been gradually occluded for us.

This is partly because the very concept of Americanness in American poetry that has developed since the 1950s has increasingly tended to include Stevens in the very definition of what might be considered distinctly American. The major critics on American poetry, and of Stevens (they are frequently and notably often the same critics) have tended to occlude Stevens' own insecurities about being an American by securing him within a narrative of which he is the end result, the starting point, or the unambiguous center. Thus Harold Bloom, Joseph Riddel, J. Hillis Miller, or Helen Vendler have come to insist on Stevens' embodiment of a distinctly American tradition.<sup>1</sup> This process of occlusion often contrasts sharply with Stevens' own struggles to consider himself American.

As John Timberman Newcomb and others have demonstrated, the poetry of Stevens has become firmly embedded in the most influential accounts of American poetry that were published after 1955 (Newcomb 172–235). This is true to such an extent that one wonders what the American poetry tradition might look like without Stevens. Stevens enabled certain critics to formulate a clearer sense of American tradition than had been hitherto available to them. In *The Continuity of American Poetry* (1961), the book that did so much to map American poetry for subsequent generations, Roy Harvey Pearce utilized Stevens' idea of the "major man" as both a starting point and a culmination. Stevens appears prominently in the Foreword and the Afterword, and is the only poet to have a chapter devoted exclusively to him. He also appears in the 1987 Introduction to the reissue of *The Continuity of American Poetry*. The very thesis of Pearce's study is rooted in Stevens' thought: the "'Americanness' of American poetry is, quite simply, its compulsive 'modernism'" (5).

In this regard, it is important to remember that *The Continuity of American Poetry* represented a form of cultural labor that mirrored one being performed by Stevens: the identification of that "Americanness." It would be easy to forget or overlook the originary principle of *The Continuity of American Poetry* and, consequently, the specifically non-comparative stance that Pearce takes. In 1954 Pearce was invited to give a series of lectures on the history of American poetry at the Salzburg Seminar in American Studies. The very origin of the book lay in the will to characterize American poetry as separate from European and even to demonstrate this separateness to Europeans. It is certainly no stretch also to see *The Continuity of American Poetry* as belonging to a cold-war ethos of stabilizing a separate American identity at home and promoting it abroad. Pearce identified Stevens as the most important clarifier of American poetry, its "Americanness," and elevated him because Pearce could identify an act of translation, of assimilation that is being performed in Stevens. "Isn't it absolutely necessary to consider how *symboliste* poetics . . . was returned to America—for example, in the work of Wallace Stevens?" (7). Pearce's formulation here, that symbolist poetry was returned to the United States, is telling for a number of reasons. It emphasizes the idea of assimilation and transla-

tion of the foreign that is evident not only in Stevens' poetry but also in the critical accounts of his work. That is, Stevens himself is an appropriator and assimilator *par excellence* of the foreign. But also, Pearce's phrase is consistent with how critics have confronted and resolved the apparent contradiction in Stevens between his love of the foreign, the exotic, and the development of a distinctively American poetic. That is, there is no contradiction at all, because Stevens is consciously and deliberately making the foreign American. Albert Gelpi performs precisely the same gesture as Pearce in *A Coherent Splendor* (1987). Gelpi acknowledges Stevens' indebtedness to *symboliste* poetry, and to Mallarmé and Valéry in particular. However, he takes Stevens' wariness in acknowledging such indebtedness as if this gave him permission to ignore it, and to focus instead on the debt to Poe (Gelpi 61–62).

Pearce thought that future comparative studies would be facilitated by *The Continuity of American Poetry*, because he had laid the groundwork for one side of the comparison, the identification of an American poetry tradition. But, conversely, the deeply felt influence of his book turned out not to be in encouraging the comparative, but in enabling and consolidating further identifications of an American tradition. Subsequent critics both maintained and elaborated on the centrality of Stevens to their construction of Americanness and repeated Pearce's view that Stevens' interest in the foreign was a characteristic that actually drove him more deeply into a developing American tradition, rather than being something that could be used to challenge his Americanness. After all, the necessity of appropriating a tradition had long been identified as a condition of modernity (by T. S. Eliot in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" [1919]) and had often been used subsequently to illustrate a characteristically and distinctively American approach to tradition.<sup>2</sup> In fact, at times this identification of Americanness is made as part of a defense of Stevens against critics who would marginalize or deprecate his achievement. This is most apparent in Frank Kermode's influential 1960 introduction to Stevens, an especially important book because it was written for a European audience, and for many it represented the first dissemination of Stevens and Stevens criticism in Europe. In his first chapter Kermode writes of Stevens as both "profoundly American" (13) and, in what is perhaps a mildly contradictory statement, "an original American" (21). Even though the precise terms of that Americanness remain unstated and Kermode's claims are kept comfortably abstract, the Stevens who is being mediated to European readers is that of the most representative American poet.

What have not been apparent in the last forty years or so are the comparative studies that Pearce expected his work to stimulate. Conversely, we have seen Stevens himself driven back into the American tradition more deeply so that by now he is inextricably embedded in it. This process is not exclusive to Stevens of course. Tellingly, one can look at recent studies and critical biographies of many other American poets and see the

way in which their links with Europe are being minimized or ignored; this has certainly happened with Frost, Bishop, Berryman, and others. Furthermore, the kind of research and argument that has sought to bring Stevens out of the poetic tradition alone has primarily functioned to bring him into alignment with an intellectual history or with broader American cultural narratives. Harold Bloom's work has of course been influential in aligning Stevens with an American intellectual and philosophical tradition that has to include Emerson and William James, and there has been a boom of Stevens studies since especially the late eighties that have situated the poet in the context of American pragmatism.<sup>3</sup> Although Milton J. Bates is himself careful to acknowledge and consider the significance of European influences like that of Nietzsche on Stevens, his work certainly also facilitated the version of Stevens that someone like Frank Lentricchia presents in *Ariel and the Police* and *Modernist Quartet*. Lentricchia locates Stevens within a familiar American story, as someone who absorbed cultural ideals of progress, manliness, and self-reliance to the extent that he was insecure about his financial dependency on his father and defensive about poetry as a manly activity. There is no need to take issue with these versions of Stevens, or to dispute the intellectual or poetic or cultural contextualization that has, rightly, given such prominence to him. But one effect of this contextualization has been to minimize or obscure the kind of struggle to be an American that goes on in Stevens' poetry.

## II

One particularly self-conscious strategy that Stevens uses in making himself an American is in linking his own narrative of being a poet with one of America's key mythical narratives. This is most clearly evident in "The Comedian as the Letter C." The poem's success in this regard lies in the way that Stevens can couple his own poetic concerns with a standard version of American history, the story of the emigrant. Crispin is both an emigrant and a poet whose aspiration to belong to the soil is acknowledged by Stevens as part of a significant colonizing gesture but which is at the same time a narrative about becoming a poet of earth, of that local soil. As critics on the poem have consistently argued, Crispin's journey is embedded within an American myth of individuation and self-actualization, which Stevens' phrase "mythology of self" (*CP* 28) helpfully articulates. In this characterization, though, there has been a tendency to minimize the degree of anxiety in the passage prior to Crispin's self-actualization on American soil. This anxiety is especially evident in the first section, where Crispin is temporarily stateless, poised between Europe and the Americas. He is homeless at sea, on the Atlantic Ocean, because as an emigrant he has abandoned or renounced his native soil. He is at the same moment homeless as a poet, at this point confronting (and temporarily lacking the resources to counter) earth's lack of malleability. The narrative of becoming a poet is troped into the narrative of becoming an American.

This is a self-reassuring maneuver for Stevens, through which he can persuade himself that his poetic identity is entirely consonant with a sense of Americanness and of being a part of American history.

"The Comedian as the Letter C" is ultimately a poem of triumph, or, at least, a proleptic expression of triumphal aspiration, in that Crispin's assumption of a new identity coming from the soil is seen as inevitable. In this way the poem has been a very useful one for critical mappings of American poetry: it has typically been read as representing for Stevens what *In the American Grain* was for Williams. Both are considered as narratives of how identity is necessarily and ideally actualized or transformed by the American environment; this is what Stevens referred to when he said that Americans had the land in common or, as he wrote in a letter to Hi Simons, "in the United States everyone sooner or later becomes an American" (L 360). But however it ends, the insecurity of Crispin on the Atlantic Ocean, poised between two continents, without a home and without the poetic and imaginative resources that might transform the sea into one, is a haunting episode for Stevens and one that represents an anxiety or even a crisis that recurs when he confronts the alien. Crispin on the ocean is a man without a mythology, no longer sustained by a mythology generated from the "old world" but as yet without the resources or inner capacity either to inhabit or to construct an alternative. The Atlantic represents a moment of crisis for him, temporarily unsupported as he is by myth. Often in his poetry Stevens is bound to return to such a moment, to consider that same *ding an sich*; he then must acknowledge that the colonizing imagination has its limitations, that the will to transform is defeated by the immutability of things as they are, even though things as they are may enrich and enlarge the imagination itself.

This recognition is of course a recurring trope in Stevens' poetry and one that is represented and dealt with in a variety of ways. But it is important to recall how far it is related to a concept of selfhood and of Americanness. It also leads to a particular dilemma in Stevens and one that is intimately linked to the ways in which he saw himself as American. That is, things could be utilized by Stevens only in a way that abstracted them, took them out of their own soil, their own reality. Otherwise they might not be translatable at all into an American idiom and hence redundant for the enrichment of the self. The mention of John Constable in "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" makes this clear: "John Constable they could never quite transplant / And our streams rejected the dim Academy" (CP 154).

Stevens can elide such a moment in "The Comedian as the Letter C" because he is able to trope it as a necessary part of a process, the first act of an unfolding drama. That is, Crispin chronologically or dramatically moves on from this crisis to an ultimate harmony with what will be his native soil, after the landing in the Americas and the subsequent journey from South to North. But it becomes less easy for Stevens to deal with this kind

of moment later in his poetry and it increasingly troubles him. The “trouble” will be articulated by Stevens himself in poetic or aesthetic terms. In a letter he mentioned that the “relation . . . between imagined things and real things” was “a constant source of trouble” for him (*L* 316). But that “trouble” also has implications for how far his own poetic identity might be congruous with a national identity. In other words, the triumphant conclusion of “The Comedian as the Letter C” and Stevens’ ability there to locate anxiety as the necessary first act of an unfolding sequence are at risk in many other poems, particularly in those that figure the alien, the exotic, and the European. It is interesting to note that the narrative trajectory of “The Comedian as the Letter C” is actually replicated, consciously or not, by critical accounts of Stevens that seek to demonstrate a movement from early anxiety (about his Americanness, about his poetry, about the *symbolistes*) to mature self-assurance. The chapter on Stevens in Albert Gelpi’s *A Coherent Splendor* is an excellent example of this narrative replication. Having written of Stevens’ early insecurity and search for identity, Gelpi can move his narrative so far toward the successful elision of crisis that he can write of “[t]he serenity and confidence of Stevens’ later years” (71). Such willed belief in serenity and confidence underestimates the continuing sense of crisis and anxiety in Stevens.

### III

This crisis or threat was intensified by Stevens’ love of the foreign and the exotic, for the things that might mark him as an elitist. That is, his tastes could certainly be considered undemocratic and therefore unAmerican. These tastes were a measure of his difference from other Americans, and when he must confront this in poetry, in poems such as “A Duck for Dinner” and “Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue,” there is a notable irresolution of the potential crisis. The danger may be partially resolved by the fact that the exotic, foreign things (“the box / From Esthonia: the tiger chest, for tea” [*CP* 201]) come to him, thus functioning as immigrants primed for assimilation. That is, Stevens need not leave his native soil in order to appropriate them into an imaginative (and even an actual) order. Unlike John Constable, these are ready for appropriation and so they come to him as if they were unbidden. In “Of Hartford in a Purple Light” Stevens writes revealingly of the sun:

A long time you have been making the trip  
From Havre to Hartford, Master Soleil,  
Bringing the lights of Norway and all that. (*CP* 226)

The crucial word here is “bringing,” as if Hartford were the blazing center of reality receiving tribute from the sun itself. The lights, and the ocean, “and all that” refresh the town with their exotic possibility but are after all only momentary transformations prior to the town’s assimilation

of them into its own identity. Similarly, in "Arrival at the Waldorf" the momentary transformation of the hotel into romantic abstraction comes from the way Guatemala is brought into temporary alignment with it. In this way, the exotic phenomena are brought into the reality of the American soil; they refresh it, but at the same time (to reiterate what was for Stevens a familiar crisis) they are thereby no longer complete in themselves, having been subject to the necessarily transformative assimilative act that in some instances is actually a commodification—the box from Esthonia: the tiger chest, for tea.

Stevens' relation with elsewhere, with the possibly exotic other, involves a crisis that impinges upon his Americanness as much as upon his poetic self. The attraction that he felt for the exotic challenged his aspiration to believe in a natural Americanness and could be reconciled only by reinforcing a pattern of poetic, cultural, and imaginative manipulation. Far from being natural, being American has to be knowingly constructed against all that threatens it. This is of course to restate a familiar cultural paradigm: that Americans are highly self-conscious about their national identity; a self-consciousness that may be enacted simultaneously as assertive pride and as anxiety. In some respects, foreignness was less challenging to Stevens if it could be presented to him already formed and therefore ready for a facilitated assimilation. There is a reassuring, euphoric aspect to the word "bringing" in "Of Hartford in a Purple Light," implying as it does offering, presentation. Tellingly, in "The Irish Cliffs of Moher" the cliffs are in a sense brought to Stevens for meditation. That is, the picture of the cliffs that Stevens received as a postcard from Jack Sweeney (*L* 760) has abstracted them from their own necessary native soil and has facilitated their transplantation to his capable imagination. The real Irish cliffs are as non-malleable as the rock that provides the title of the book in which the poem appears, so the postcard is crucial in enabling an elision of the crisis that otherwise has to be addressed. Thus the cliffs are available for imaginative transformation because the postcard has already performed the task of uprooting them from the specifics of place. Once they are isolated from their Irish reality, Stevens is permitted not only to transform them in the way that he does, but it is as though he has been granted the freedom to insist on their transcendent quality, "Rising out of present time and place, above / The wet, green grass" (*CP* 502).

In "The Irish Cliffs of Moher" the threat of difference is nullified by the presentation of the scene in a postcard. In other poems, though, Stevens must, as it were, work harder to provide for himself comparable acts of deracination. This struggle is evident particularly in two poems also dealing with Irish figures, "Page from a Tale" and "Our Stars Come from Ireland." The former poem is especially fascinating, being a kind of conversation with Yeats's "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." Yeats himself is a potentially troubling figure for Stevens, in exactly the terms earlier outlined. To him, Yeats was an aspirational figure, whose perceived conso-

nance of poetic and national identity was worthy of emulation, and whose insistence on the writers' "contact with the soil" was in line with the aspiration of Crispin. The problem is that this admiration posed a threat to Stevens' heautocratic integrity and to his insistence on his own native soil.

"Page from a Tale" plays out this conflict by taking a celebrated poem by Yeats and testing its appropriateness when, like the cliffs of Moher, it is removed from its native context. "Page from a Tale" is at once a poem of suggestive appropriation in its acceptance of the longing for home and belonging that "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" represents and an exploration of the limits of such appropriation (and appropriateness). Like an arctic version of Crispin, Hans is seen at the end of his voyage, at a moment when the aspired-to cabin-home of Innisfree could represent either nostalgia for something lost or desire for a particular future. To Hans the emigrant, the poem could be a basis for thinking about a home that he has left behind or, if he is a Crispin-like immigrant, of the home that he is prepared to make in a new landscape. Stevens' ambivalent use of "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" actually brings out something in Yeats's poem that itself often goes unremarked: that the longing for the cabin is represented both nostalgically, as if it were a pastoral return to a lost place imaged from the urban landscape of the present, and as a utopian aspiration for the future, as suggested by the use of the future tense ("I will arise and go now" [Yeats 12]). For Stevens, Hans's fear of the unknown, or of the unexplored territory that he is about to enter, leads him to regard "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" as a comfortingly nostalgic poem, but also as one that would restrict his capacity for exploration of elsewhere. Alternatively, the representation of it as a poem suggesting future possibility, implying as it does a controlled, ordered nature, gives force and meaning to his expedition into the hyperborean wilderness. As "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" is ambivalent and indeterminate for Hans, so Yeats is for Stevens. Yeats is both *semblable* and someone rooted in an alien and unattainable soil.

Such creative uncertainty, arising from a confrontation with what is elsewhere muted or elided, is further apparent in *The Auroras of Autumn* with the poem "Our Stars Come from Ireland." The crisis in this poem is more severe than that figured in "Page from a Tale," partly because of the strong personal affection that Stevens developed for Thomas McGreevy.<sup>4</sup> In "The Irish Cliffs of Moher" Stevens found essential the framing of elsewhere through the medium of the postcard. In "Our Stars Come from Ireland" he must confront an alternative narrative, one that appeals, but that also requires subsumption into his own work. The title "Our Stars Come from Ireland" carries something of the same insouciant self-centeredness evident in the word "bringing" from "Of Hartford in a Purple Light": Ireland brings us these stars; the narrative of Ireland itself is Westward. But the title's Crispin-like self-assurance is a form of bravado, contradicted by the poem's text in which personae and constructed selves become blurred. Deep friendship can be both a blurring of one identity with another and a

confirmation, a sharpening and clarification, of the sense of one's individual identity. Stevens' stated friendship for McGreevy both threatens and seeks to confirm Stevens' own self and his American self. "Our Stars Come from Ireland" is very much a poem concerned with process, with a self caught in the act of self-definition when confronting the potentially destabilizing presence of another. Stevens copes with this by an imaginative investment of himself in the identity of the other, a romantic gesture whose putative arrogance is offset by the resistance offered by the very ambivalence of the poem's personal pronouns:

*Tom McGreevy, in America,  
Thinks of Himself as a Boy*

Out of him that I loved,  
Mal Bay I made,  
I made Mal Bay  
And him in that water. (CP 454)

The poet's essential power to make, appropriate, and order is here triumphantly proclaimed. But what does this power actually represent? Is it, as the epigraph indicates, an imaginative investment in McGreevy, therefore representing only McGreevy the emigrant looking back on another life in a Kerry village, looking from the perspective of something made of that life, and at what he now "makes" of that village? Yet the "I" of the poem is also Stevens, who is both imagining another life, the life of his friend, and, crucially, making that other life part of his own, Crispin-like pattern: "He stayed in Kerry, died there. / I live in Pennsylvania" (CP 455). McGreevy's life and the history that he metonymically represents simultaneously enrich Stevens and threaten to impoverish him. They enrich through their enlargement of the individual imagination, by its relatively exotic presence:

These are the ashes of fiery weather,  
Of nights full of the green stars from Ireland,  
Wet out of the sea, and luminously wet,  
Like beautiful and abandoned refugees.

The whole habit of the mind is changed by them. . . .  
(CP 455)

To change a mind's whole habit is necessarily to challenge that mind's self-definition, the Crispin aspiration that Stevens laid down so early in his poetic career. What makes "Our Stars Come from Ireland" so fascinating is Stevens' naked acknowledgement of the enriching alteration of the mind's whole habit, while he is simultaneously taking steps to nullify the

threat that such power represents. He copes with the threat by a reinforcement of a cultural and historical narrative that replicates the journey made by Crispin (and that has itself been replicated for Stevens by his most perceptive critics). Put simply, Stevens maintains his own equilibrium through shifting his imagined McGreevy from emigrant to immigrant (“everyone sooner or later becomes an American”). The poem’s first part rehearses the emigrant’s backward glance but the second part, tellingly titled “The Westwardness of Everything,” tropes the immigrant (or “refugee”). This is the immigrant who, like the word “bringing” in “Of Hartford in a Purple Light,” brings something exotic into the landscape in a gesture of aspirational assimilation to it. Hence enrichment can be acknowledged (affecting the whole habit of the mind) but only insofar as it functions within defined parameters; that is, within and without the American soil. For a poet who aspired to an unreflecting Americanness, Stevens had to work hard to reflect on it.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Already in the early sixties, Joseph Riddel told critics to stop neglecting Stevens’ “American roots, for Stevens has been an articulate spokesman of the poet’s essential identity with his native soil” (30). A few years later, in 1966, Harold Bloom began to insist on the fact that the principal heir to Emerson and Whitman was “Wallace Stevens, whom it is no longer eccentric to regard as the ironically yet passionately balanced fulfillment of the American Romantic tradition in poetry” (qtd. Newcomb 223). Likewise, and despite her own bias toward formalist rather than cultural-historical analyses, Helen Vendler has repeatedly argued, “Stevens is resolutely American in his poetics” (125–26) and a poet who both sought to “fill in the blanks on the American map” (131) and invent “a flexible American meter” (137). Finally, in an interview by Imre Salusinszky, J. Hillis Miller has explained his predilection for Stevens in patently nationalist terms: “For many of us Americans, the obvious fact about Stevens is that here is a twentieth-century American poet who didn’t sell out to England and become an English citizen, or do the worse thing that Ezra Pound—who is clearly part of world literature—did. Stevens is very provincial. You read it, and it’s terrific: it’s like Paul Valéry or Goethe or something, but he worked in Hartford, Connecticut” (Salusinszky 233).

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, W. H. Auden’s essay “American Poetry” in *The Dyer’s Hand and Other Essays*.

<sup>3</sup>A few of many possible examples would be Poirier’s two books and Levin’s book.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas McGreevy (1893–1967) initiated a significant correspondence with Stevens when he wrote to him in 1948. The relationship between the two men has been detailed and perceptively analyzed by Brazeau, Egan, and Jenkins 94–105.

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# Stevens and England: A Difficult Crossing

CAROLYN MASEL

IN WHICH STEVENS IS LATE FOR THE BALL  
AND HIS REPUTATION IS DIMINISHED

**N**O POET COULD HOPE for a better reception than that given to Wallace Stevens' *Selected Poems* by Donald Davie in 1953:

For nearly thirty years the Americans have been claiming, in Wallace Stevens, one of the great poets of our age. It seems inexcusable that the English reader has had to wait so long before he could judge this poet for himself. It is especially exasperating when one discovers that Stevens deserves nearly everything that his admirers have claimed for him. He is indeed a poet to be mentioned in the same breath as Eliot and Yeats and Pound. That is his place, and that is the company he must keep. We are called upon now not to assign a status but to define an excellence. (455)

One can only hope that Stevens read this gratifying review. We know from the *Letters* that he did read Austin Clarke's review in *The Irish Times* (L 776), which evinces a much cooler response to his work—one that assigns him firmly to "the little-known 'Gallic school,' " which is sufficiently foreign to the English poetic tradition to cause the reviewer to be "puzzled" by Dennis Williamson's suggestion in his Foreword to The Fortune Press selection that "[Stevens'] work could have value as an influence on younger poets in England" (Clarke 6; see Williamson 10). Ignorance of the "Gallic school" and its offshoot, Imagism, was, Clarke implied, no great loss: its otherness was sufficient to cause even its American followers to view "their own country, with its brilliant colours, *distantly* yet accurately" (my emphasis); moreover, the relative importance of Imagism corresponded to the size of the poems it produced and the way that "each image was isolated and displayed as effectively as the latest model in a hat shop" (6).

The polarization of reviews that these examples typify appears to have generated some initial interest in Stevens, but did not sustain it. Sales of

the Faber *Selected Poems* remained very low until 1965, when the paperback edition appeared.<sup>1</sup> George Lensing states that this edition “truly launched Stevens’ popularity in England,” and Lee Jenkins has recently remarked that “[t]he people who don’t know [i.e., the British people in T. S. Eliot’s phrase about them] have since remedied their ignorance” (Lensing 147; Jenkins 5). My view is a contrasting one: I am much more dubious about Stevens’ position in England at present; indeed, it seems to me that, except for a handful of short, much-anthologized poems, Stevens has largely failed to “take” in that country. He is rarely if ever mentioned in the same breath as Yeats, Eliot, and Pound; the English voices that sound his name on Parnassus are mostly those of poets, and few of these accord him anything like the attention they devote to the pre-eminent modernist triumvirate. Fewer still can be said to have been influenced by Stevens in any significant way; among these, Charles Tomlinson is probably the best known.<sup>2</sup> The reasons for this profound and lasting failure are well worth pondering. Some of the factors are circumstantial—there is, Davie notes, the crucial matter of timing—but, almost fifty years after the appearance of the *Selected Poems*, other, more enduring issues surrounding Stevens’ (non)reception suggest themselves.

The historical contingencies are comprehensively discussed by Lensing in his essay “Wallace Stevens in England,” and Jenkins has augmented our knowledge of Stevens’ reception in her discussion of contemporary reviews (Jenkins 1–6). The three-way tussle between Alfred A. Knopf, The Fortune Press, and Poetry London that resulted in the brief co-existence of two distinct *Selected Poems* in England is an extraordinary tale of bitterness, stubbornness, and plain confusion. As far as Stevens was concerned, the wishes of Alfred A. Knopf were always paramount, and Knopf himself was a nice judge of Stevens’ obligations.<sup>3</sup> There is no doubt that Stevens felt, as he frequently asserted, that his major American publisher had always treated him generously, but it is equally true that his contracts with Knopf hampered, to the point of preempting, his ability to contract with other publishers, whether English or American. While he did manage to publish a small selection of poems in various journals and pamphlets in England, time after time his efforts to extend his English readership were stymied because, as he explained to Harry Duncan, “I imagine that Mr. Knopf would very much dislike my doing so” (L 524). Knopf’s firm certainly played its part in delaying the appearance of a legitimate *Selected Poems*. In 1950, Stevens made a selection for Knopf that was never published. In 1951, he made a second list intended to aid, but not direct, Marianne Moore’s selection, which eventually became the Faber edition in 1953 (L 732 n 2, 733–34, 750). It seems clear that, for all his protestations that Englishmen speak too freely about American writing, that, “After all, it is more important to be published [in America] than anywhere else” (L 524), that “there are infinitely more meanings for Americans in America” than in Europe (L 691), Stevens did his utmost to acquire an English read-

ership without aggravating Knopf, and he never quite gave up hope of success.

While Stevens managed, with some difficulty, to negotiate with Mr. Knopf so that small, non-commercial American presses such as The Alcestis Press and The Cummington Press could produce limited editions of his work, these tiny enterprises were extremely vulnerable. What is more, their publishing ventures were jeopardized not only by the conflict between the two publishing interests in London and the ire that this generated in Mr. Knopf and his colleagues, but also by events in New York. Indeed, it is remarkable how closely the relations among Alfred A. Knopf, Henry Holt & Co., and the Borzoi imprint mirror the tripartite transatlantic conflict. In this respect Stevens' correspondence with The Cummington Press provides an additional perspective.

Shortly after The Cummington Press brought out its second edition of *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* in 1943, Harry Duncan, the pressman-cum-editor, reported that an unknown Englishman, Nicholas Moore, had requested a review copy [26b].<sup>4</sup> In his reply Stevens identified Moore as the son of the philosopher George E. Moore and a promising poet himself [28a]. Two years later, he reported that Moore was arranging with Poetry London to publish "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" and "Esthétique du Mal" or parts thereof. He assured Duncan that the English edition would not compete with his own, and that in any case he would have sold all of his edition of *Esthétique du Mal* before the English edition appeared [48a]. Prompted by Stevens, Duncan then wrote to Moore, generously urging him to publish both poems in their entirety rather than in part [48b].

Shortly afterwards, Duncan received from Knopf a request for permission to reprint a number of poems from Cummington Press books, including six poems from *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* [49a]. These were to appear in the new edition of *The Borzoi Book of Modern Verse* (a Knopf imprint). Stevens advised Duncan that he was quite within his rights to charge Knopf permission to reprint other poems, but wanted him not to charge Knopf at all for the sections from the "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction":

He does not like the fact that you published that book, and I am afraid that he will not like the fact that you are publishing ESTHETIQUE DU MAL. Consequently, I don't want to irritate him, since he is just as likely as not to decline to go on with me. [49b]

In January, Duncan received a note from one Kimon Friar, requesting that he be allowed to include "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" *in its entirety* in the "Borzoi Book." Duncan was concerned, since he still held copies that were unlikely to sell if Knopf printed the entire poem. He also wondered how this would affect Nicholas Moore's proposed English edi-

tion [56a]. Stevens replied that he intended to submit "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" to Knopf as part of another book (*Transport to Summer*), and that, if necessary, he would buy out The Cummington Press's remaining stock himself. Since Kimon Friar's request was at odds with Stevens' plan, he advised Duncan to refuse permission, without saying why [56b, 56c]. It was at this exquisitely unfortunate juncture that Moore wrote back to Stevens to say that he was ready to go ahead with "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" and "Esthétique du Mal." It was perfectly clear to Stevens that he could not follow through on this agreement without aggravating Mr. Knopf, whom he had just succeeded in appeasing with the promise of another book (L 524).

What happened next only worsened the situation. In August 1946, Duncan received a letter from Henry Holt & Company announcing that they had taken over the anthology formerly called *The Borzoi Book of Modern Verse* and were requesting permission to reprint all of "Esthétique du Mal" plus seven sections of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction." They also wanted to know if the terms extended to Knopf would also apply to them [64a]. There was only one possible answer. Stevens sent Duncan a copy of the letter to Knopf in which he informed him of this development [64b] and entrusted Duncan with the unequivocal message that Holt would have to deal with Knopf directly. By the end of August, Stevens had delivered the manuscript of *Transport to Summer* promised to Knopf, thereby attaining the vantage of sublime non-obligation from which he could express his regret at not being in a position to accede to Holt's request [66].

Given all this, it is hardly surprising that Knopf acted swiftly and decisively when, early in 1953, Stevens informed the firm that The Fortune Press had apparently published a substantial selection of his poems in England (L 770). This edition derives its entire contents from three of Knopf's American editions.<sup>5</sup> Its timing could not have been worse for Faber: The Fortune Press selection preceded it by only six weeks, and review copies from both publishers were received in close enough proximity to be discussed together.<sup>6</sup> Eventually, after Knopf's recourse to a firm of lawyers, The Fortune Press agreed to withdraw the book and destroy all copies except those already sent out to reviewers (Edelstein 100, 376). Stevens himself was lucky to obtain one (L 770, 776; see also Edelstein 100).

The question remains as to why Knopf did not choose to make an arrangement with a major English publisher such as Faber a good deal earlier. The fact that, in the early 1950s, Knopf decided to reprint all of Stevens' books rather than himself produce a *Selected Poems* provides one kind of answer (L 732 n 2).<sup>7</sup> Michael Schmidt has asked the question from the other side of the Atlantic, calling Stevens "one of Eliot's sins of omission at Faber & Faber: why did he wait so long to publish Stevens, a poet more self-effacing than he was himself and quite obviously his peer? Perhaps there the answer lies" (703).

NICHOLAS MOORE AND WALLACE STEVENS:  
A TRANSATLANTIC AGON

Stevens certainly kept a keen eye on contemporary English poetry. He was able to identify Nicholas Moore for Harry Duncan as “one of the younger English poets, very active, and potentially one of the best, if not the best of them” [28a], and to reply confidently and in detail to a request to identify the best poetry magazine currently being published in England (L 332). His complaint that only one book of poetry “that amounted to anything” was published in England in the spring of 1944 (L 475) suggests a comprehensive perusal. He was, moreover, acutely aware of the different literary tastes of American and English readers and of the grounding of that difference in political and economic circumstances. For that reason he would much have preferred first Nicholas Moore and then Marianne Moore to have made the selections for his English edition (L 475, 732, 733–34).

Given Nicholas Moore’s pivotal role in Stevens’ endeavors to be published in England, Stevens’ appraisal of Moore’s poetry seems worth remarking. Lensing notes that relations between the two poets remained cordial despite the protracted dispute, and that Stevens’ library contained several inscribed volumes of Moore’s poetry (although he does not say which) (134, 142). In fact, it is much easier to see what Moore valued in Stevens than the other way around. At the time of his first dealings with Stevens, Moore was still finding his own voice. The first section of *The Glass Tower*, which contains poems written between 1936 and 1940, employs a gothic vocabulary, and the volume as a whole evinces the influence of Yeats and Eliot as well as Stevens.

Of course, Stevens’ influence, which now seems obvious, would then have been apparent to only a handful of English readers.<sup>8</sup> How many readers of “Poem for the New Year,” for example, would have appreciated the similarity between the speaker’s instructing his beloved how to read his poem and Stevens’ address to his muse in “Two Figures in Dense Violet Night”?

Pore over it then, my darling:  
swathe it in sentimental swaddling-clothes:  
use plush romantic phrases:  
say “It is engraven in my deepest soul,  
where loved roses

burn like pagodas, temples  
of a love that is divine, my love for you.”  
Go on: be sentimental  
while you can: this is no time for strictness:  
phrase is all. (GT 9)<sup>9</sup>

“The Form of the Ship” with its pentameter tercets, its nonsense, its French, and its playfulness, is even more Stevensian:

So, firm on *terra firma*, I form take,  
Make my demands upon the apprehensive world  
That is not quite accustomed to my words.

Wild goo-la-goosh and empty quod-me-rod  
Strike jarringly on unaccustomed ears,  
Yet not all words are founded on such form.

For instance, take a knight at arms, or night  
In arms, and mix the mould of metaphors.  
Who is it rides upon the easy ship?

Firmness of form is something to dwell upon,  
As on the firmness of the peak of breasts,  
And poetry is nothing more or less.

So with my ri-de-hi and fol-la-lo  
I whisper to my mistress in the knight,  
*Et je suis très touché, mon ame [sic], ma jolie.* (GT 65)

This is a pleasant enough pastiche, but in comparison with Stevens it seems heavy-handed and (except for “quod-me-rod,” a delightfully English nonce compound) lacking in wit. It seems significant that this poem should come from the second part of *The Glass Tower*, which consists of poems written between 1940 and 1943. One common pattern for maturing poets is to subsume or repudiate or in some way get rid of the influential voices of precursor poets. (Stevens’ development does not conform to this pattern—nor, for that matter, does Eliot’s or Pound’s. Rather, residual voices in Stevens become contested sites.) But what *The Glass Tower* seems to suggest is that Moore could not free himself from his ancestral figures except by confronting them directly and addressing the issues each raised for him. Hence, the second section of *The Glass Tower* where this confrontation occurs seems, if anything, *more* Stevensian than the first.

For example, one stanza of “Poem” seems to owe its setting to “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle” XI: “My dear lady, the frogs are here, / . . . Make croaks and groans, tread with their delicate feet / On the flat leaves of lilies” (GT 40). When Stevens’ sole frog “Boom[s] from his very belly odious chords” (CP 17), sexual disgust seems to overtake the couple who were just moments ago “Keen to the point of starlight”; by contrast, in Moore’s poem, the frogs’ presence seems reassuring and their delicate balance exemplary in a hostile cosmos where “Stars and birds / Frighten the fishes, frighten us” (GT 40).<sup>10</sup>

Also in the second section of *The Glass Tower* are two poems actually dedicated to Stevens, and we can thus surmise that this book is among the volumes Moore sent him. "The Waves of Red Balloons" is a rather odd poem. To begin with, despite Moore's assertion in the first stanza that Stevens' "was the elegaic [*sic*] mystery" (GT 64), the rest of the poem goes on to deal with the clownish, whimsical aspects of Stevens' poetry—precisely those aspects that had resulted in the charges of effete-ness and irrelevance that had dogged American criticisms of *Harmonium* and would persist long after in the English psyche and retard his acceptance on that side of the Atlantic (Jenkins 4). Then there is the matter of the past tense, which Moore uses throughout, as though he were constructing an elegy—yet the dedicatee was not only very much alive and writing prolifically, but was, moreover, hoping to be heard in England *in propria persona* largely through Moore's intercession. Stevens might well have been as dismayed as flattered by such verse:

Poetry meant for him a wave of balloons,  
A string of colours over a ballroom floor,  
The ball this life of ours, the balloons the many  
Adventures intricate that joined our lives,  
The tunes strummed on the humming guitar. (GT 64)

The second poem for Stevens, "Yesterday's Sailors," constitutes, despite its (nostalgic or belittling?) title, a more adequate homage, although also an ambivalent one. Stevens is not mentioned by name except as dedicatee, but is linked allusively to Yeats and Eliot, allusion in this poem operating less compulsively, more thoughtfully. After an announcement of legendary heroic types, the poem proceeds to introduce representative man, as "a negro strums / The blues on a blue guitar, and the street throbs / With his unfolding voice and stricken chords, / 'If you see me going, hang your head and cry' " (GT 68). We cannot help noting how easily Moore, a lover of jazz, extends representativeness across racial lines, something of which Stevens seemed incapable.<sup>11</sup> What is definitive of America, according to this poem, is its capacity to hear all of its own voices: "The American continent captures every cry." By contrast, "Yeats in his tower grew blind with rage and lust," and Eliot, while "longing for the truth," seems to deploy a sophisticated distancing technique, eschewing the human:

Willing to be forgiven and forget,  
Hearing the eternal sigh of thin violins,  
The human anguish over, O, what waters,  
The mingling, intermingling, fading chords. . . . (GT 69)

Only Stevens, it seems, can engage with what is happening in Europe, which he does, paradoxically, by not engaging with it: his is the only imagi-

nation powerful enough to forge an alternative vision. While the “car of triumph” rides *Unter den Linden* and “Over the graves, over presumptuous graves” and while “The martial music speaks of histories, / . . . of clanging swords, of vast / Armaments growing under the sweat of hands,”

Over the graves the beautiful ladies walk,  
Swishing their fans, vaunting their elegant ankles,  
Their tails spread out to meet the sunny air.<sup>12</sup>  
The emperor is riding anywhere,  
They do not know, they do not care, but spread  
Over the graves their delicate, beautiful tails.

Over the graves, over presumptuous graves. . . . (GT 69)

Moore is himself treading on dangerous ground here. My sense, as I have indicated, is that he is *not* directly charging Stevens with irrelevance, but, on the contrary, welcoming a vividness of imagination that is equal to—indeed, stronger than and hence necessary to combat—the sinister triumphalism of the enemy. Where the military-industrial imagination reigns, war will result; another kind of imagination is required. Yet by attaching the emperor and his court to the same landscape, having them walk over the same “presumptuous” graves as the man in the triumphal car has ridden over, he surely runs the risk of creating an equivalent desecratory triumphalism. Moore’s Stevens may carelessly obliterate the enemy, but imperialism in this context remains an extremely uncomfortable construct, and it is doubtful that casual elegance constitutes sufficient cause to die for. Moore’s ambivalence registers in the persistence of those graves, as in the utterly oblivious gaze of the promenaders. Ultimately, both of his poems for Stevens sound an admonitory note, alerting the reader to the dangers of dwelling in the apolitical world of aestheticism.<sup>13</sup>

A disengaged aestheticism is today, it seems, no longer a charge leveled at Stevens *tout court*. For one thing, Stevens’ deep moral investment in the role of the poet is now generally acknowledged. For another, as Moore intimates (and Marjorie Perloff, James Longenbach, and others have shown in detail), an apparent disengagement is itself a political position. But Stevens has still to answer a related charge, which seems worth remarking here, since it is the very charge that Nicholas Moore leveled at America at large. An undifferentiated oneness, circumscribed by only notional “external regions” (notional because unknowable, filled with mirrorings of selfhood, “the escapades of death” [CP 405]), a lawless amorphous unity precluding political perspective, is always the danger of Stevens’ solipsism.<sup>14</sup> It threatens the last cantos of “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction”—a poem Moore yearned to publish—and is, I think, evaded only by a willed address to an Other (“Fat girl, terrestrial” [CP 406]). This diffuseness of

agency at the center was precisely the danger that Nicholas Moore discerned in America during the War. In a moving poem entitled "A Letter from Prison," set in England and addressed to his parents in the United States, he expresses the fear that America's incurable narcissism must result in its entering the arena of war. Where England cannot avoid the evidence of ruin, America looks to England as to a mirror, without which it cannot see itself. Tellingly, in the penultimate stanza, Moore echoes Stevens' triumphant final canto of "Sunday Morning," effecting a cutting reversal:

We see the ruin that is round us here.  
We live imprisoned on our island, free  
Only to whisper, falter, and obey  
The dictates of this governmental war. . . .  
(*A Book for Priscilla* 3)

Moore's bitter plaint is somewhat reminiscent of Pound's characterization of Europe in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" as "an old bitch gone in the teeth" and "a botched civilization" (188), memorable images from the previous World War. Both poets are shockingly—mercilessly—unpatriotic, Pound undermining any notion of a Cause, Moore repudiating any notion of individual agency (especially his own) in a climate of coerced conformity. On this occasion, Moore's allusion to Stevens' poem of 1915 would have been available to discerning English readers.<sup>15</sup> While Moore represents England as America's necessary mirror, his use of Stevens' text in effect inverts the terms: he holds the mirror of America's aspiration up to England so as to compound England's image of her own ruin.

#### THE OLD WORLD IMAGINED

Unlike the transatlantic Moore, Stevens, with his unrelenting obligation to Knopf, was never in a position to interrogate his own profoundly ambivalent response to England and the English. The *Letters* present a fascinating complex of attitudes, full of vacillation and contradiction. On the whole, Stevens' view of the English seems broadly stereotypical, yet he demurs from American paradigms about England just when one least expects it. The values that emerge again and again are of an English primness and fastidiousness in contrast with something like an American vitality (*L* 353, 754). He is dubious about what he sees as the English mistrust of the romantic, which is so central to his poetic enterprise (*L* 282), and daunted by the contrasting British emphasis on realism, especially just after the War, when the swift changes taking place in Europe make him sympathetic to his own most unsympathetic critics (*L* 524, 525). His friendship with Irish poet Thomas MacGreevy gives rise to some very pronounced anti-English sentiment, one of the most memorable remarks being that America is preferable to Europe as a place to enjoy life, since in America there is "no risk of being suddenly ossified by the stare of an Englishman"

(*L* 691; also *L* 611, 614 [to Leonard van Geysel], 646). But there is no question of cultural insularity: New York seems dull when it publishes and displays only American things (*L* 543); France rather than England or America is the great source of modern poetics (*L* 542, 598). In one suggestive letter of 1948, he comments that the absence of anything of interest from Germany, France, and England has afforded him the opportunity “to think about many things that had originated in one or the other of those places.” Then, with characteristic evasiveness, he switches his thoughts to Switzerland (*L* 594).

The fact that Stevens never visited England—never, indeed, got closer to Europe than Staten Island (Jenkins 6)—only emphasizes England’s importance as a mental construct, a way of figuring place itself. One of the most intriguing expressions of the complexity of his attitude toward it occurs in a letter of 1939, in which he remarks:

When the war broke out I was in Virginia and in a part of it where the influence of the English on both houses and landscape still persists. The influence on the houses, which are as a rule modest affairs, is shown in this fact, that so few of them are really matter-of-fact houses. The people who live in them have some sense of style about living. The influence on the landscape is shown in a resemblance to an 18th Century park. Where I was there was very little of the ordinary fields of other parts of the country, which at this time of year, when all the crops have been gathered except corn, have a definiteness which makes the whole country look like a huge prosperous farm. (*L* 342)

This apparently simple anecdote seems to grow more elaborate the more one examines it—rather like a Stevens poem. Part of its meaning is conveyed by its pace and cadencing, whereby the admiration for the stylish inhabitants of the English houses is replaced by a deeper appreciation of those “ordinary fields of other parts of the country” that make it resemble “a huge prosperous farm.” Then there is the subtle discrimination between an American sense of facticity based on the “definiteness” of the material world—we begin with a seemingly factual statement about Virginia’s historical legacy illustrated by the “fact” that the houses are not “matter-of-fact”—and a flimsy English “influence” that results in a “sense of style about living” (a superfluity?) in a landscape that bears a “resemblance” to a park (but is not one), with only vestigial traces of the expected agrarian landscape. There is a sense of containment in the image of the eighteenth-century park as distinct from the communal sense of the ordinary landscape of fields that seems unified in its compositeness. This is reinforced by the sense of perspective: “people” live in the English houses, but “I” know the rhythms and appearance of other parts of the country; an ethos of democracy is encoded here.

This passage provides a suitably complex background against which to consider another telling statement, this time in a letter to Thornton Wilder in 1951:

My father came from Bucks County. He was a farmer's son although he himself was a lawyer and lived and practiced in Berks County. . . . I look back to that farm and the people who lived in it the way American literature used to look back to English literature. (L 732)

Stevens' Old World is a farm in Bucks County; English literature only comes in by way of analogy and does not displace the true source, which is land-based and actual (or, adopting the diction of the earlier passage, factual). One's current achievements are to be measured against the practical achievements of one's grandfather, just as one's father measured himself in his own occupation; the play of Berks County against Bucks County perfectly illustrates this.<sup>16</sup> The anxiety of influence inscribed here—writ as large as Harold Bloom could possibly desire—is emphatically agonistic; the counties' names may derive from the English shires, but the postcolonial backward glance is history. In this respect Stevens is distinguishing his personal conception of influence from the old American literary paradigm of English literature that was still operative in his own formal education.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, the fact that, at this late stage in his career, Stevens evinces little anxiety of English influence does not mean that English literature has grown irrelevant to him. The poets to whom Stevens alludes and whom he echoes, not merely in his early work, but throughout his poetic career—the poets who are, for better or for worse, part of his central nervous system—include those noted in his *Journal* during his second year at Harvard: "Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Keats, Browning, much of Tennyson" (L 26)—hardly an original list. These names are also, obviously, among the poets that English ears will hear reverberating through Stevens' poetry. Donald Davie, for instance, identifies Keats as a formative influence and Tennyson as an unfortunate one in his 1953 review.

#### OCEANS OF DIFFERENCE: A DIFFICULT CROSSING

It is striking that Davie, who would within ten years become the foremost English champion of American modernism, should make no mention of the Emerson-Whitman tradition in his highly perceptive review of Stevens.<sup>18</sup> The omission must be at least partly attributable to his intended readership, which was largely deaf to this central strand of American poetry, and quite possibly uninterested in becoming attuned to it. Davie's strategy of promoting Stevens by evaluating him in the light of the poetic tradition with which his readers were familiar was a sensible one. While the late 1950s and 1960s effected huge changes in the reception of Ameri-

can letters in England (and elsewhere in the English-speaking world), it does seem as though certain forms of radical indifference have persisted, including a general disregard of that central American romantic genealogy of poetry. This is not the same as saying, with Helen Vendler, that the English cannot understand Stevens in a simple equation of nationality with sensibility, which Jenkins rightly objects to (5). Rather, it is a matter of the way that culture is encoded in England at large and particularly within English institutions.

Stevens consistently supported the idea of a university as a secluded ivory tower in which valuable thinking could take place, and the sheer difficulty of his poetry—compounded by his consistent reluctance to promote his own work, especially by his physical presence—has resulted in his mostly remaining there. Thus, we must turn to the treatment of American letters in English universities to see what has happened to him. While some universities run joint programs in English and American literature, by far the predominant tendency is to separate the two literatures, confining American letters to interdisciplinary American Studies departments. Of course, there are good pedagogical reasons for both arrangements, but each has its drawbacks. It is difficult for students to understand *As I Lay Dying* if they have no knowledge of *Ulysses*. The student who appreciates Henry James's debt to Hawthorne may never realize the debt he also owes to George Eliot. The highly allusive Stevens, who draws on both English and American writers, is likely to suffer a diminution of context whichever arrangement is deployed. Furthermore, it seems clear to me that, at present, the interdisciplinarity of the "area studies" option allows for a greater elision of poetry in general than the transatlantic literary option. This is not an inherent disadvantage of the area studies arrangement, but a measure of the unfashionableness of the whole genre.

Within American Studies departments it is customary to view the American Adamic impulse to return to origins as part of the larger enterprise of consciously creating a national literature. The threat to American letters from England up until the end of the nineteenth century is *actually* largely one of piracy, but the prevailing *anxiety* is that of influence, characterized by that sense of belatedness common to all postcolonial literatures, as Bloom has ably demonstrated. Considered from an English perspective, however, American literature exists in the midst of a great *néant*; English authors are not in the main anxious about American ones. The great conveyors of Whitman in the twentieth century, Dylan Thomas (whom I hasten to acknowledge is not English, though published by English publishing houses) and D. H. Lawrence, did not succeed in passing on Whitman's influence to the next generation of British poets. Nicholas Moore is an exception in being a truly transatlantic figure, conveying almost single-handedly the playful style he learned from Stevens; lost to British readers in the 1950s, he reappeared only posthumously in the Carcanet selection (*Longings of the Acrobats: Selected Poems*) of 1990. In the light of all this, it

may be helpful to see Stevens as an index of the condition of American poetry and, indeed, American literature as a whole. The celebrated Adamic impulse may be as much a matter of circumstantial constraint as self-conscious enterprise.

Certainly, more recent literatures in English are as open to American as to English poetry, and Stevens' influence has extended all over the English-speaking literary world. It is pointless to argue that Stevens ought to have been more influential than he has proved to be in England; the moment has probably passed and, in any case, affinity cannot be legislated: poets find one another according to the law of surprising felicity. If, however, Dennis Williamson's suggestion that Stevens might have something to teach young English poets might be modified to include young English readers, then a different question emerges. What can English readers best learn from Stevens? As an Australian living in England, I cannot answer from personal experience, but as a teacher in an English university, I would venture this answer: something about romance, and something about pleasure.<sup>19</sup>

Stevens noted the English eschewal of the romantic in the midst of war, and one strand of development in postwar poetic taste has followed the preference for realism, especially autobiographically based work. Philip Larkin, following John Betjeman, illustrates that tendency. Another major strand, epitomized by Ted Hughes, is the mythopoeic. (A poet such as Tony Harrison belongs, it seems to me, in both camps.) The current fashion for light verse, as practiced by Wendy Cope and others, perhaps does something to prepare readers for the shorter lyrics of *Harmonium*, but students nevertheless find Stevens' kind of wit quite foreign.<sup>20</sup> The same is true of his poetic method; it is not just a matter of being unaccustomed to inductive reasoning, but to the degree of abstract thinking that decoding even an early Stevens poem requires. Fortunately, the athleticism involved appeals instantly to some temperaments.

More surprisingly, given the English romantic heritage, many students prove resistant to Stevens' mellifluousness. Possibly this is *because* they are accustomed to the lyric richness of their own tradition (Keats, for example, is taught on some secondary school syllabi) and Stevens' particular beauty may seem unexceptional, but my sense is that they may also be evincing a resistance to voice *qua* voice, a resistance that is not confined to English students. In addition, Stevens' particular lyricism is related to his love of hyperbole, which *is* a characteristic American trait (emanating from Whitman), and which my English students, equally characteristically, resist as excessive (once they have overcome the tendency to read hyperbole as irony). This reluctance to be seduced by Stevens' lyricism is a difficult barrier to overcome: what does one say to a reader who remains indifferent to such lines as "Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her, / Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams / And our desires" (*CP* 68–69), or who, like Davie, singles them out as sheer sentimentality (457)?

At some point during the course of my survey of modern American poets, often during our discussion of Stevens, a student will invariably question the value of poetry about poetry. The great good of Stevens, it seems to me, is that he so ably demonstrates what poetry can be made to do, the burdens it can bear, the questions it can be made to ask. Ultimately, these are not merely questions about poetry; they are questions about one's place in the scheme of things, challenges to the cosmos and the human imagination that every student should ask. Ultimately, the pleasure of studying Stevens is inseparable from the recognition of poetry's greatest powers.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lensing (147), and Jenkins after him (4), note the influence of Frank Kermode's book *Wallace Stevens* (1960), but Jenkins does not mention the fact of the new edition's being a paperback as a factor in increased sales.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Schmidt notes the influence of Stevens also on James Fenton, who admired Stevens "briefly to the point of idolatry," and on the Scottish poet Norman MacCaig (841, 909–10).

<sup>3</sup> See Knopf's letter to Stevens, a finely nuanced admonition that is too long to quote here, but the gist of which is "[i]n view of our long, and certainly not unpleasant, publishing relationship, I think we should be taken rather more fully into your confidence" (qtd. Lensing 139).

<sup>4</sup> Permission to quote from *The Wallace Stevens–Cummington Press Correspondence 1941–1951* is courtesy of the Director and University Librarian, John Rylands University Library of Manchester. Numbers between square brackets refer to this collection.

<sup>5</sup> The arrangement of the selection in the Fortune Press edition is rather odd and possibly shows evidence of haste. After working through the contents of the second edition of *Harmonium*, *Ideas of Order*, and *Parts of a World*, Dennis Williamson revisits the three volumes in turn to complete his selection. Readers of this edition would have derived a skewed idea of Stevens' development.

<sup>6</sup> Donald Davie's exceptionally canny evaluation of Stevens is based on both the Fortune Press and Faber selections, as are Austin Clarke's and H. D. Hanshell's.

<sup>7</sup> See also Knopf's remark: "After all, there could never be any money involved for anyone in connection with placing your books in England" (Lensing 139).

<sup>8</sup> Some of Moore's titles would have spelled "Stevens" to his readers: "Analogy from a Night Club" (*GT* 77–78), "Nobility and the Pear" (*GT* 102–07), "Recreations of a Blue Sonneteer" (*Longings of the Acrobats* 61–62), "Ideas of Disorder at Torquay" (*LA* 25–27), "*Des Étoiles Maladroites*" (*LA* 67). These contrast strikingly with the many pieces drably titled "Poem." All quotations from Nicholas Moore's *Longings of the Acrobats* are reproduced with the kind permission of Carcanet Press Ltd.

<sup>9</sup> In the simply titled "Poem" the Stevens connection seems more tenuous, but to my ear the combination of Moore's diction and rhythm with the logical cast of his pentameter evokes the sonnet tradition as mediated through Stevens:

It is better that I dally with angels,  
Taking them to peaks of fire, with life,  
And teach them among the green woods the clever

Ways of love and the little preliminaries.  
It is better not to trouble them with grief.

If they cook acorns in a forest fire  
And carol and dance to the tunes of wind in trees  
It is like children, and the day is gay,  
And the gates of heaven are open to all our fears  
And the grey worlds are far away. (GT 19)

<sup>10</sup> How Moore's frogs may be "Couched in the wet grass of this simple country," perched "On the flat leaves of lilies" and "by the watery sea" is another question (GT 40). Only one of these contexts corresponds with Stevens' "pool of pink" (CP 17).

<sup>11</sup> For Moore's comparative lack of racial anxiety see, for example, his "Elegy for Four Jazz Players" (GT 96–98), in which particular musicians are specified. For a cogent investigation of Stevens' negotiations with American racist culture, see Lisa DuRose.

<sup>12</sup> In reading this otherwise astonishing line it may help to know that earlier in the poem "ladies' fans unfold like flowering tails" (GT 68).

<sup>13</sup> In some ways Moore's poems anticipate the criticisms leveled at Stevens for his espousal of the impossible ideal of the apolitical by Marjorie Perloff (esp. 46–47, 58–59).

<sup>14</sup> At least in theory. The self at the center may be undifferentiated, being axiomatically abstract, yet it is also (for instance) indubitably masculine.

<sup>15</sup> Cantos I, VIII, IV, V, VII were published in the commuted version of the poem published in *Poetry* VII (November 1915) and reprinted in *The New Poetry* anthology in 1917, before appearing in *Harmonium* and in the enlarged edition of the anthology in 1923.

<sup>16</sup> I cannot help wondering whether Stevens might have thought of himself as dwelling in Books County.

<sup>17</sup> See L 17 n 5, 23 n 1, and 33 n 6 which outline his courses at Harvard from 1897–1900.

<sup>18</sup> Schmidt asserts "[t]he importance of [Davie's] critical writing—particularly in *Ezra Pound: Poet as Sculptor* (1964) and his later books on Pound . . . —is inestimable" (855).

<sup>19</sup> In the context of teaching, it ought to be said that a Stevens based on the Faber *Selected Poems* leaves a good deal to be desired: most English readers will never have encountered the shorter late lyrics, which many believe to be among Stevens' very best work. *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, a much more useful anthology altogether, is not generally available in England. It can be specially ordered from the United States, but students whose interest in Stevens is kindled in the classroom are, in my experience, much more likely to purchase the readily available Faber *Selected Poems*.

<sup>20</sup> This thumbnail sketch of three streams or aspects of recent British writing is not intended to represent a comprehensive overview, but to give some indication of what undergraduate students might have been exposed to. It may, however, in its very narrowness, also give some indication of the degree to which the English literary establishment seeks to control the production and dissemination of texts. If the notion of cultural policing seems preposterous to American readers, I can only point to Clive Bush's 1997 reference to the "nostalgic, belle-lettristic mafia of the British Establishment" (15). Bush welcomes the small press anthologies of the nineties, whose sheer range is evidence of a vibrant poetical culture. However, while the poets discussed in Bush's study and named in his introduction clearly evince American influences, Stevens does not appear to be one of them.

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## Wallace Stevens and Canada, 1903

MERVYN NICHOLSON

FEW CANADIANS ARE AWARE that Wallace Stevens, one of the greatest American writers of the twentieth century, visited Canada for a seven-week stay in 1903. Leaving from Montreal, which impressed Stevens with its “Frenchness” (*SP* 118), he traveled by train to the westernmost province, British Columbia. As a new province in the Dominion of Canada, British Columbia was a little older than Stevens himself, who was twenty-three years old at the time. Queen Victoria had been dead for just two years and Sir Wilfrid Laurier was Prime Minister of Canada. The Canadian Pacific Railway (C.P.R.)—Canada’s trans-continental equivalent of the Union Pacific Railroad in the United States—had been completed in 1886, seventeen years before Stevens rode it all the way across the country. The distance was approximately 4,000 kilometers, so Stevens saw an enormous amount of Canada. In fact, it appears that the longest continuous land trip he ever took was this journey across Canada to the Rockies, and then, almost two months later, back again. Still in his early twenties, Stevens was at an impressionable age, and there is little doubt that this trip into the Canadian wilderness had an enormous and formative impact on him.

The railroad that Stevens traveled on had been the promise to the British colonies of the Pacific coast that had persuaded them to join the Canadian confederation, even though it took Canada well over ten years to redeem this pledge. Stevens rode through Alberta and Saskatchewan *en route* to British Columbia. Both were still sparsely inhabited in 1903, and in fact, both were still territories under control of the national government in Ottawa and did not become real provinces until 1905.<sup>2</sup> Stevens stayed in a camp in the Kootenay country south of the transcontinental rail line, not too far from the United States border. This was the same border that Chief Joseph of the Nez Percé tribe, pursued by the U.S. cavalry, had desperately and vainly attempted to cross over. In other words, what we are looking at in Stevens’ youthful expedition is the real thing: wilderness.

But this is of course precisely why he went to Canada, why he went to British Columbia: to be able to experience the real thing, wilderness, nature as it is, or the *ding an sich*—in short, what Stevens would later term

“reality,” that which is unencumbered by the imagination or civilization or history. Thoughtfully considered, the British Columbia expedition has importance for several reasons: it connects with every aspect of Stevens’ work as a poet and biographically as a successful businessman.

The Kootenay country was still largely untouched wilderness when Stevens camped there, though there were already substantial mining communities in the region. Many of these communities are now ghost towns, the best known being Fort Steele. There is still mining in the region today—for zinc, tin, and other metals, as well as coal; but mining, with its boom and bust rhythm, is definitely on the decline. I have not been able to identify the exact location of Stevens’ camp, and a number of name changes have occurred over the years, making the precise course of his trip uncertain. However, we do know that he traveled by C.P.R. through Calgary, Banff, Lake Louise, Field, to Golden, British Columbia. At Golden, he changed trains and proceeded southward along the valley of the Columbia River between two major ranges of mountains, the Selkirks and the Rockies, both of which he refers to in his journal. He got off the train and then went eastward into the Rockies, which are high and steep in this region (the same region of what is now Top of the World Provincial Park). This is still wild country today, home to grizzly bears, wolves, Rocky Mountain goats, and other animals that are now rare in the United States. Many of the lakes have excellent fishing, as I can testify myself, and it is a favorite region for visitors from Europe and the United States to go camping and hunting.

In 1903, when Stevens was there, this very wild country was arguably unlike anything he was familiar with. Indeed, his trip to British Columbia was unlike anything else Stevens had experienced before—or would experience afterward. He never went on a trip like this again. He never again spent weeks camping in the wilderness, in mountains that were real mountains, Alpine sublimities and not the rather big hills to be found in the East. I use the word “Alpine” here advisedly: the Canadian Rockies are technically “Alpine” in the geographer’s sense; they are like the Alps in that they are steep, rocky, with snowy summits, evergreen forests, and glaciers, and while they do not have agricultural fields on them, there is farming in the valleys (including the Columbia River valley along which Stevens traveled). To be sure, Stevens undertook many trips to voluptuous, sybaritic Florida, but none of these could compare with the stark wildness and naked Alpine scenery of his Canadian experience, even if they might have included a pugilistic encounter with Ernest Hemingway. He suggested to Elsie that after their wedding they should go camping in New Brunswick, in eastern Canada (where Franklin D. Roosevelt had a summer home), but they never went. Stevens associated “camping” with “Canada” and although he did visit Canada again, it was only on business. The very singularity of the trip made it a conspicuous happening in his outwardly uneventful life.

Singular as it was for Stevens, however, his confrontation with the wilderness was a normal enough *rite de passage* in American culture, demonstrated in works ranging from James Fenimore Cooper's novel *The Deerslayer* to Michael Cimino's movie *The Deer Hunter*. The vastness of untamed nature has often marked a crossing from innocence to adulthood, the passing-away of a phase of life. This was, moreover, a hunting trip; that was the main purpose of the expedition, and entries in Stevens' journal such as his description of shooting a porcupine in the belly remind us of that purpose. It seems clear that his trip to the Canadian Rockies—into the heart of the wilderness—was what might be termed a gender ritual: it figured as an assertion of masculinity by the poet who in the era of Oscar Wilde played around with the persona of "Peter Parasol."

Stevens always remembered his trip to Canada, his first outside the United States. It was once-only, but like many once-only experiences it left a permanent, indelible mark. "This was one of the most important experiences of his life," writes his biographer Joan Richardson (*Early Years* 162). How Canadian memories could come back to haunt him is demonstrated, for instance, in his lecture "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" in 1940. There Stevens speaks of the distant European War then being fought with Hitler. The United States at this point was still in isolationist peace, but Canada had been in the war from the beginning in 1939. Briefly but strikingly, Stevens suddenly conjures up the image of Toronto or Montreal being bombed. The image is of considerable importance because the context is so momentous. He is talking about "the pressure of reality," one of the key expressions in his thinking, and of the capacity of this pressure to overwhelm consciousness; or, in his own words, "the pressure of an external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation" (NA 20). It is precisely this pressure that poetry is designed to resist or evade, or should, more broadly, enable us to live with. The "pressure of reality" is getting more direct now, Stevens says; in the past, by contrast, writers "knew of the events of their day much as we know of the bombings in the interior of China and not at all as we know of the bombings of London, or, rather, as we should know of the bombings of Toronto or Montreal" (NA 21).

In my opinion, "The Comedian as the Letter C," the poem that tells of a naive character who journeys from South to North in the Americas to confront a difficult, alien reality and learns to live with it, has something to do with Stevens' trip to Canada, the North American country that begins with the letter C. Stevens, who loved to read the dictionary, had plenty of time to ponder the word on his lengthy train trip between metropolitan New York and what was often perceived by Americans as a "colony," recalling the "Colony" of "The Comedian as the Letter C." Not surprisingly, part four of "The Journal of Crispin" connects "colony" with "Canada" (and with "snow") (OP 57). In some respects, Canada was still a colony of Britain, the critically important area of foreign policy, including the decision

to make war, being handled by Westminster, for example. Stevens notes in his journal the inevitability of a "Queen's Hotel" in the remote and isolated mountain village of Golden. The train he returned on was, characteristically for Canada in 1903, "the Imperial" (*SP* 126). (I checked in Golden to see if there was still a Queen's Hotel, but could not find one. Stevens also stopped over in Field, a tiny railroad village near Lake Louise. Field is still there and is a charming place to stop, with a number of turn-of-the-century buildings that Stevens would have seen.)

A sizeable chunk of the manuscript journal that Stevens kept while on his camping trip in British Columbia was destroyed; no one knows why, and no one knows what was contained in the missing pages. Holly Stevens did not even realize that her father had made this trip, which was on his mind at the end of his life. In his last days, Joan Richardson observes, "the trip to British Columbia returned again and again (the paleness of the cold sky before dawn, the mountain cat, the rattlesnake, the movement of things that could never be seen in the dark of the night woods)" (*Later Years* 427). The images are haunting. Richardson's comment about the quality of the prose of Stevens' journal is striking too; what she calls "the direct, child-like excitement of the entries describing his trip to British Columbia" (*Early Years* 191) stands in marked contrast with the voice heard in his journal before leaving New York on this trip. The picture of Stevens wrapped up in his Hudson's Bay blanket in a tent, "look[ing] like a loaf of bread by the fire" (*SP* 119), is enough to enlarge our sense of him. (Hudson's Bay blankets are to this day famous in Canada for their warmth and quality.) If the trip was an important event of his life, then Canada—somewhat surprisingly—has a significant place on the mental map of one of America's most canonical poets.

The standard view of Canada in the United States is that it is the most boring place on the planet; it is a vast blank, the black hole out of which all that cold air pours down in the winter. The country and its wilderness are in a sense synonymous with nothingness, the nothing that is not there and yet that is. Few American writers of importance have paid any attention to Canada, the closest neighbor to the United States geographically, historically, economically, and culturally. Among the rare full-length books about or set in Canada by a major American writer, there is Thoreau's record of a brief excursion to French Canada, which also happens to be his most perfunctory and probably least read book. (Thoreau spent less time in Canada than Stevens did.) Typically, it is a book that concludes, in effect, that since there is nothing of interest there, the Brits were quite right to have kept it; no one need bother about going there. The notion that Canada is nothing, a blank, an aporia, also suggests a certain anxiety, however, no doubt the American anxiety of confronting a nation that actually *refused* to join the American revolution: an unthinkable absurdity to the American psyche. Thus the country figures in the subtlest way as America's means of historical self-definition: that which it is not.

It is therefore consistent that critics have hardly noticed the British Columbia journey. Thomas F. Lombardi in his *Wallace Stevens and the Pennsylvania Keystone: The Influence of Origins on His Life and Poetry*, denigrates the experience as having had little effect (74). Joan Richardson in her biography refers to it briefly, emphasizing the way the trip articulated Stevens' anxieties about his masculinity, his "deep insecurity about his manliness" (*Later Years* 167), as she puts it. Frank Lentricchia, in his analysis of the young Stevens' struggle with femininity, omits any reference to it. The one real exception among critics is Gyorgyi Voros, author of *Notations of the Wild: Ecology in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*. For Voros, the British Columbia expedition was critical in shaping the poet's perception of nature and hence of his whole poetic vision. A key point for Voros is that the Canada Stevens found was essentially a barren and forbidding place, a working demonstration of Darwinian nature as survival of the fittest in the context of a universal struggle for survival. She goes on to argue that Canada gave Stevens the paradigm of "North," just as Florida gave him the paradigm of "South," and that, furthermore, Stevens preferred North over South, and felt more comfortable, ultimately, with the barer and austere landscape of the North than with the lush, uncontrollable fecundity of the South. The South makes for good holidays, but you do not want to live there.

For Voros, the trip to British Columbia was in effect a Darwinian exercise in the manner of businessmen today going on wilderness expeditions or other survival exercises in which the goal is to learn self-reliance and team-building and ways of overcoming fear. In other words, it was a kind of boot camp intended to make one a stronger competitor in the battlefield of capitalist struggle, where, in the words of Thorstein Veblen's contemporary *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), "[t]he canons of pecuniary decency are reducible . . . to the principles of waste, futility, and ferocity" (228). "Ferocity and cunning" were the capitalist's prerequisites, and "any individual who enters the competitive struggle without the due endowment of these traits is at a disadvantage, somewhat as a hornless steer would find himself at a disadvantage in a drove of horned cattle" (174). Whether Stevens himself would ever come to possess or treasure these traits may be kept an open question, but we should note at least how he came of age at a critical time in the history of American business, a period in which the American business class acquired a kind of wealth and power unimaginable earlier. Since his trip came before he had in any sense established himself, either as a poet or as a businessman, it certainly functioned as a kind of watershed, with youth and indecision on one side and success and direction on the other—including marriage, for he met Elsie the year after the trip.

This view of Stevens' trip, as a training exercise for adult competitiveness, tallies with the fact that it was his own boss, W. G. Peckham, who took him on the voyage. One is struck reading Stevens' journal account of

his adventure holiday by how many different kinds of animals are a target, including the porcupine, a creature that is a byword for conflict-avoidance. Yet in 1903, in the era of Teddy Roosevelt, the sense of nature as a big shooting gallery in which the targets are living beings was quite standard, especially among men. Killing animals was (and in many cases still is) a familiar marker of male identity, of power and success. In Europe, hunting was reserved for the aristocrat and plutocrat; in the New World, any (real) man could be a hunter, just as any (real) man was supposed to be able to acquire mastery in the competitive struggle.<sup>3</sup>

While this view of Stevens' journey, as a gender ritual and as an exercise in the competitive ethos of capitalism at a critical point in its expansion, is plausible enough, the expedition must have had more complex meanings for the budding poet as well. Gyorgyi Voros argues that Stevens' trip laid the basis of his overall philosophical understanding of nature, of the very metaphysics that informs his poetry. But I think the effect of the trip might well have been more visceral and imaginative and that it raises some interesting questions for understanding poetry and even American perceptions of Canada. Hunting—that is, the killing of animals—did not seem to have had a deep appeal for Stevens. There is, for instance, no record of his taking any “trophies” back to New York with him. We find Stevens in camp reading Jacques Bossuet in French and listening to Peckham, his poetic and highly intellectual boss, reciting Heinrich Heine (and Peckham was the kind of *litteratus* who translated Heine). We find Stevens also reading Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped* and *King Solomon's Mines*, among other things.

The impact of the British Columbia trip on Stevens shows itself perhaps in other ways, then. One is struck, for example, by the often spectacular image of mountains in his poetry. Stevens' mountains are not the comfortable, rounded, tree-covered mountains of the East where he lived; they are sublime, overpowering, and magnificent. They are nothing like Robert Frost's hills. The impact of mountains on his imagination is evident immediately from his journal account, which brims with technicolor images and bursts of metaphoric intensity, with for example a mountain range visualized as a procession of hump-backed camels trooping along the dome of heaven (*SP* 119) or “the mountains near the Vermilion Pass hooded in the gray of their rocks like deathly nuns” (*SP* 121). On 7 August 1903 he writes, with his usual wit, “The mountains last night seemed to be posing for the Detroit Photographic Company” (*SP* 120). One is also struck by the sensitivity to wild animals and to animal life that his poetry often displays. The place where Stevens came face to face with wild animals was Canada. One senses that the bloodshed was enough and that another, more sensitive perception of animals was present in Stevens' consciousness which hunting could obliterate but also stimulate as a kind of reaction. I have argued elsewhere that the first poem in Stevens' *Collected Poems*, “Earthy Anecdote,” may be seen to contain a



The Alpine splendor of the Canadian Rockies surrounding Stevens' camp.  
Photo courtesy of Chris Nicholson.

reference to his British Columbia trip, and that the figure of the firecat derives from his encounter with a mountain lion in the Rockies (see my "The Riddle of the Firecat"). He remembered that mountain lion on his deathbed; it was a companion for life. Its image takes up a climactic place in the journal account of the trip, where he records catching a glimpse of what he calls a "lion" disappearing over the ridge of a mountain, just after dawn. Mountain lions are large, reclusive, and magnificent creatures; even a glimpse of one of these cats is unforgettable.<sup>4</sup> He and his companion chase it, hoping, needless to say, to kill it with their rifles. Then, straining to see the mountain lion, "A moment later I caught sight of a splendid goat watching us from the top of a higher ridge. We crept along as well as we could & finally got within reach" (*SP* 124). Stevens did not shoot, however, because his own balance on the steep mountainside was too precarious.

A few days later, he is back in the great metropolis, New York City, and remembering in his journal how he left British Columbia. There were three days of walking, part of the way with a deer they had shot tied to the back of a skittish horse. They reached a rail line and caught a freight train to Golden, at the entrance to Kicking Horse Pass: "Here we stopped at the usual Queen's Hotel, bathing in new tubs to our heart's content" (*SP* 126). Then he boarded a passenger train, "the Imperial Limited on which we came East through icy mountains, prairies of snow, & then the pleasant warm lakes & fields of Ontario" (*SP* 126).

Although Stevens may strike us as a difficult and philosophical poet, his abstractions and obscure locutions often conceal within them simple, vivid, and dynamic images.<sup>5</sup> A favorite poet of his, after all, was the Robert Louis Stevenson of *A Child's Garden of Verses*, whom he recommended to Elsie to read.<sup>6</sup> A number of Stevens' own poems suggest nursery rhymes and use nonsense words. But what is especially striking in this context is the recurrent motif of giantism in Stevens, the sense that there are giants in earth and sky, giants of sun and mountain and weather. Such giantism is visible easily enough simply by looking at a mountainous landscape, which often suggests the contours of a gigantic human body. The association certainly is not unique to Stevens; the idea that rocks and stones are actually earth's bones is common enough, for example. But it seems quite plausible that British Columbia and the Rockies, the extended train trip, indeed the whole Canadian vista, was a powerful stimulus toward the perception of nature as vastness, the primitive sense of sky as cosmic man and earth as cosmic woman (implied in the wedding symbolism of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction"), the feeling that life is a union of the two just as much as it is a union of the imagination and reality.

The sensitivity to exuberance and energy in nature is something Stevens shares with Whitman. After all, Stevens is Walt Whitman in the key of Emily Dickinson—a poet of powerful affirmation but in a riddling style. Yet unlike Whitman, Stevens is attuned to the barrenness and austerity of nature, and it may be argued that this perception of nature, as sublime but austere, is a peculiarly Canadian perception, mainly because of Canada's enormous winters and gigantic landscape. The Canadian trip would have greatly underscored Stevens' inclination to view nature as vast and magnificent but also as impersonal, at times remote (rather than merely frightening), and this combination characterizes much of Stevens' work. Coolness, light, airiness, and fleetingness are qualities that fascinated Stevens. The Canadian Rockies, with their "thousand diaphanous shades of ether" (*SP* 120), gave him a spectacular display of just these qualities. They are a kind of antidote to fear, and Stevens is above all a poet of courage—"one of our small handful of essential poets," as the Canadian critic Northrop Frye put it.<sup>7</sup>

Ultimately, his voyage into the Canadian wilderness gave him a potent experience of "reality," of things as they are, the place where the imagination is born (and needs to be born), the origin of differentiation, so to speak. The stark reality of the trip to Canada was a turning that marked a beginning. It was both formative for Stevens and an unspoken treasure. It stimulated his writing without ever entering it in a simple descriptive way. Here perhaps Canada had the deepest meaning for Stevens, because it not only marked the end of his youth and the start of his serious business and adult life, it also presented the ultimate paradox: poet and businessman, man of the wilderness and man of formal routine—the interleaving of contradic-

tories without contradiction. As “Connoisseur of Chaos” puts it, in the spectacular visual idiom of the Kootenay landscape: “He sees that eagle float / For which the intricate Alps are a single nest” (CP 216).<sup>8</sup>

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The railroad was technically completed in 1885, but the first transcontinental train reached the coast in 1886.

<sup>2</sup>A “province” in Canada is a political-administrative unit more or less equivalent to a state in the United States. The quasi-colonial governments of the western territories of Canada had an appointed “Commissioner” as chief executive: see Friesen’s standard history of the subject.

<sup>3</sup>See my *Male Envy*, ch. 3, on this point. In Veblen, sports such as “hunting . . . afford an exercise for dexterity and for the emulative ferocity and astuteness characteristic of predatory life” (173), where “predatory life” is Veblen’s expression for competitive market culture. Hunting is a means of training the skills and exhibiting the values of that culture.

<sup>4</sup>Mountain lions are also dangerous. A woman was killed just outside of Banff by a mountain lion in December 2000, and another woman was killed by a mountain lion in the very area Stevens visited in 1997.

<sup>5</sup>See my “The Slightest Sound Matters” for discussion of this point.

<sup>6</sup>On Stevens’ interest in Stevenson, see Brogan and also my “Reading Stevens’ Riddles.”

<sup>7</sup>Frye was one of the first important critics to write on Stevens, and he produced two seminal essays on the poet, “The Realistic Oriole” and “Wallace Stevens and the Variation Form.” I omit here an account of Frye’s meeting with Wallace Stevens.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Gyorgyi Voros, who concludes that Stevens’ expedition to Canada ultimately formed the basis of his metaphysic, which she defines as “an affirmative, frequently joyful vision as an alternative to the twentieth century’s increasing objectification of Nature and alienation from it. [Stevens’] abiding quest was for the rediscovery of a dynamic, fulfilling relationship with the vast nonhuman portion of the universe without resorting either to traditional religiosity or to the philosophy of humanism that prevailed during his lifetime” (3).

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# Stevens, Buddhism, and the Meditative Mind

WILLIAM W. BEVIS

## I

WALLACE STEVENS' RELATION to Buddhism raises questions not only of his knowledge of Eastern culture, derived mostly from books and prints, but more importantly of consciousness. Much of Stevens' conventional understanding about the Far East was part of the Orientalism of his day and superficial. However, his meditative habits of mind—detached contemplation, holding the ego in abeyance, espousing and letting go of ideas with a Nietzschean exuberance—are similar to monastic forms of Mahayana Buddhism in China and Japan. Such meditative habits remain unusual in our culture and alien to our vocabulary, and, therefore, Stevens' meditative tendencies (versus his romantic and imaginative ones) are more easily perceived and discussed by reference to Mahayana Buddhist models.

Most readers of Stevens easily acknowledge his meditative tendencies in the sense of "reflection" or "contemplation." Most also agree on the dominant and distinguishing attitude in Stevens as one of an amused observer of the process of consciousness. The meditative analysis in the Eastern or Buddhist sense, however, while including the above readings, is more radical. It addresses Stevens' repeated invocations of "nothing" (not "something" considered calmly), his anti-imaginative epiphanies, and his growing belief that his imaginative and meditative models are complementary opposites. Meditation in the sense of intellectual contemplation is not necessarily the opposite of romanticism; however, meditation conceived as stopping the mind is.

These radical (deep-rooted) cultural issues are best approached through "The Snow Man" and its two dominant readings, from the 1960s to the present. Setting aside for the moment fine points about the listener or the snow man or the narrator, we can say that the poem comes to a remarkably negative conclusion. Is that good or bad? Those readers against nothingness, consciously or unconsciously, scramble to defend the poem or Stevens against what they assume to be a nihilism in the text: "the listener, who listens in the snow, / And, nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (*CP* 9–10). To save Stevens from nihil-

ism, these readers either attribute the words to a mistaken or limited listener/snowman (something is there that the listener does not see), or observe that “nothing” itself has to be imagined (the Buddhists would agree: all *concepts* of nothing are by definition imagined, although the experience of nothing, unimagined, is possible). The typical nihilistic reading (that is, reacting against a perceived nihilistic threat), following a common Stevensian and romantic formula of creating something out of nothing, seeks to validate fresh imaginings against a background of negation.

The nihilistic or anti-meditative reading finds its strongest proponent in Harold Bloom, who argues for a humanist distrust of detachment, a distrust of not hearing misery, and, conversely, a privileging of angst and tragic involvement over hints of union, serenity, or withdrawal. Bloom’s questions are ours: “What, we can ask about Stevens’ seeing soul, can one behold in the ‘nothing that is’? How can the beholder possess ‘nothing,’ in a positive sense of seeing-with-amazement?” (62). Bloom consistently passes moral judgment on being nothing as a form of annihilation (reduction), so he makes nothing into a fiction in order to admire it:

The listener, reduced to nothing, remains human because he beholds something shagged and rough, barely figurative, yet still a figuration rather than a bareness. This “nothing” is the most minimal or abstracted of fictions, and yet still it is a fiction. (63)

Bloom uses “still” twice to indicate continuation, but the stamp of “The Snow Man” is that “shagged” and “rough” are *not* repeated at the end. Bloom wavers between claiming imagination at the end of “The Snow Man” and hoping for it:

But, before this god-making takes place in the self, the last mythologies must be stripped from the human. This appears to be the purpose of the reduction in *The Snow Man*. The poem does not go on to intimate the return of the divinity to man; that takes place in its gorgeous counterpoem, *Tea at the Palaz of Hoon*. The Snow Man is not yet Hoon, but he is going to be, and that *potentia* is felt in the *pathos* of his poem’s closing trope. The worst reading possible then of this poem, I suggest, is the canonical one we received from Stevens himself, when he said in a letter: “I shall explain *The Snow Man* as an example of the necessity of identifying oneself with reality in order to understand it and enjoy it” (L, 464). That takes care of less than half the poem, the part in which “reality” is “regarded,” and not the larger part in which “reality” is “beheld” and so begins to become a passion. (63)

“ [R]eality’ . . . begins to become a passion.” Passion is the imprimatur, the mark of humanist validation.

But imagining, or projecting oneself onto the world, is not always a virtue in Stevens; or, to negate the noun rather than the verb, in the Buddhist fashion (how much more awkward in English), abstinence from imagination is often a virtue. As Stevens repeatedly suggests: "You must become an ignorant man again" (*CP* 380). Note the positive verb and the negated substantive: knowledge erased. Stevens does not "thunder no"; quite apart from his unusual performance in "The Snow Man," Stevens is famous for the odd distance and apparent benevolence of his nothingness and negation. A different paradigm for understanding Stevens' language of nothingness can change our perception of his work and of his relation to "modernism," a problematic term.

Is the "modern" Picasso's postmodern or the anti-modern neoclassicism of Eliot? Stevens' temporary eschewing of imagination and conceptualization ("nothing that is not there and the nothing that is"), resulting in anti-theoretical play, fragmentation, and contradiction in a context of enjoyment, is part of the postmodern strain of modernism. Avant-garde moderns from the symbolists (including Yeats) through the cubists and surrealists experimented with non-ordinary states of consciousness as alternatives to bourgeois reality and as analogues to non-linear, disjunct, or irrational art forms. In contrast, T. S. Eliot was developing, by the 1920s, a modern aesthetic theory that was in many ways neoclassical. In "The Waste Land" (1922), fragmentation is associated with despair, not at all the case for the prototypically "modern" cubists of 1906–1912. The radical, whimsical, and cubist modernism/postmodernism of Nietzsche, Stein, and Picasso had been hijacked by serious high modernists and professors, and partly because of Eliot's legacy, the term "modern" is often used as if synonymous with romantic or neo-classical aesthetics, and thus opposed to the "postmodern."

Just as Stevens' meditative tendencies linked him to a comic postmodernism (hence Stevens' appeal to Ginsberg and Ashbery), so the meditative reading of "The Snow Man" in the 1960s reflected an aesthetic shift away from Eliot's "high modernism" and his religious search for new master narratives. To read being and beholding nothing as a form of understanding and enjoyment was also a revision of existentialism and the French absurd, "le néant" played in a different key; in this way the Beats, with their Buddhist revisions, prefigured Derrida's new project. Conversely, the anti-meditative or nihilistic reading of "The Snow Man" has usually held to romantic and neoclassical expectations of imaginative constructs woven into a seamless web. "The Snow Man" may well be a seamless web, but its content, syntactic disjunctions, contradictions, and denial of vision were part of the postmodern foundation supporting Stevens' later experimentation in the long poems. For many artists, meditative consciousness has been allied with the development of postmodernism, especially with the post-World War II adjustment of humanism from high modernism to postmodernism.

We will return to these historical issues, but first we must develop and explore the meditative reading of "The Snow Man." The problem with readings that deflect or deny or defend against the nothingness at the end of "The Snow Man" is their baroque ornamentation of a bare poem. The various "somethings" in the poem, the few images, metaphors, interpretations—"crusted," "shagged," "glitter," and "misery" for instance—are not re-invoked at the end; they drop away. No new metaphors are introduced. The final inaction of not imagining (beholding "nothing that is not there") is apparently linked to some kind of enlightenment, beholding "the nothing that is." The poem leaves us with two choices: either a clever reading that shows that nothing is not really nothing, or a different understanding of nothing. The cultural conversation precedes the interpretive conversation and it extends the range of our interpretive possibilities.

Not only does the poem seem thoroughly, even comfortably negative at the end, but it has also followed a classic meditative progression to that conclusion. Despair is associated with thought ("not to think / Of any misery"), not with the final void. Thinking is negated and then self is negated—"nothing himself"—and in that condition nothing is imagined, yet some specific nothing, the nothing, perhaps the presence of absence itself, is beheld. The original, final, and essential affirmation, "is," ends the poem, simultaneously voided by its subject, "nothing." "Voided" means, in this case, emptied out, not contradicted. What the devil is being perceived?

Demonstrating how thoroughly "The Snow Man" reflects cultural expectations as much as reading differences, those with some meditative knowledge or experience find in the poem an obvious meditative paradigm: self-loss, ineffable knowledge, the stripping away of feeling (not to hear any misery) and thought (not to think). This withholding and denial lead to some kind of accurate perception of a paradoxical essence/non-essence, "the nothing that is." Most obviously, such readers see the poem as joyous and affirmative, though in a strangely cool and detached key unusual in our culture.

Stevens' comment on the poem, which Bloom deplored, resonates with the meditative reading: "The Snow Man . . . [is about] the necessity of identifying oneself with reality in order to understand it and enjoy it" (L 464). In the light of Stevens' remark, "a mind of winter" suggests a winter mind (a snow man) identifying with a winter reality (bareness), and in that case, being and perceiving nothing suggest understanding and enjoyment. Exactly such a proposition, that a union of self and other is achieved by a clear, empty consciousness, one neither imagining nor recreating reality, appears in a poem from *The Heart Sutra*, in which the clear dewdrop is the voided mind, the mind emptied of self and projecting nothing that is not there, allowing sensations to pass through:

When, just as they are,  
White dewdrops gather

On scarlet maple leaves,  
Regard the scarlet beads! (Stryk 12)

The clear dewdrop of consciousness taking color from its context recalls Stevens' remark on "the necessity of identifying oneself with reality," if one is to understand and enjoy it. One *must* have a mind of winter . . .

If the challenge to the nihilistic reading is to show where and how the imagination re-enters the poem at the end, the challenge to the meditative reading is to show the plausibility of a Hartford lawyer in 1921 writing such an apparently Buddhist poem. I believe such a challenge is reasonable; we are not seeking a caprice, a verbal artifact, but rather a significant perception—a habit of mind both Stevensian and Asian—that has entered our cultural history. Stevens' letter seems indeed to place the poem in a tradition of passive ecstatic union closer to Thoreau than to Emerson or Whitman, but occasional in our culture and exhaustively examined in Mahayana Buddhism: voidness and suchness ("nothing . . . is") are one. In addition, many Buddhist sects separate meditative experience from cultural, religious, and intellectual traditions. One could meditate, say, on a bench in Elizabeth Park, in Hartford, Connecticut, with discipline, yes, but without reading or training.

However, one could easily underestimate the extent and sophistication of the meditative texts available to Stevens. Quite apart from Max Muller's *Sacred Books of the East* ("When I was young and reading right and left, Max Muller was the conspicuous Orientalist of the day" [L 381]), and apart from Schopenhauer, whom Stevens read avidly in 1905 (and who introduced Nietzsche to Buddhism), and Ernest Fenollosa, who was back from Japan giving lectures at Harvard while Stevens was there (and Okakura, whom Fenollosa had installed at the museum), Stevens followed the work of Harvard's William James. In his years after Harvard (1900), Stevens thought James's work on "the will to believe" the most important topic of his day, and later admitted that James and Bergson were his major philosophic influences (L 476). Therefore it seems highly likely that he bought or read James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* when it came out in 1907, especially since his friend Witter Bynner was interested in Oriental philosophy and aesthetics. (They had long conversations on the subject in 1909.)

In James in 1907, Stevens could have read of "nothing" located in Hindu and Buddhist experience. In his chapter on "Mysticism," James quotes translations of the experience of nothing and then comments in words that would return in "The Snow Man" and later poems:

"All the different steps in yoga are intended to bring us scientifically to the superconscious state or samâdhi. . . . There is no feeling of *I*, and yet the mind works, desireless, free from restlessness, objectless, bodiless. . . ."

The Buddhists use the word "samâdhi" as well as the Hindus; but "dhyâna" is their special word for higher states of contemplation. . . . In the third stage the satisfaction departs, and indifference begins. . . . Higher stages still of contemplation are mentioned—a region where there exists nothing, and where the meditator says: "There exists absolutely nothing," and stops. (307–08)

"Nothing . . . is," beheld in a context of acceptance and enlightenment.

## II

My own inquiry into the topic of Eastern influences on Stevens, which resulted in *Mind of Winter: Wallace Stevens, Meditation, and Literature* (1988), began with dramatically spare and ecstatic lyrics by Stevens—especially "The Snow Man," "The Course of a Particular," "A Clear Day and No Memories," "The Latest Freed Man," and "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself"—lyrics that seemed to proceed from, reflect, or represent a state of mind unusual in our culture and quite at odds with romantic traditions (excited, imaginative) and humanist traditions (critical, judicative, engaged). My methodology in *Mind of Winter* was phenomenological. I followed neurophysiologists in asserting that a meditative state of mind exists and that, like dreaming, it has relatively stable characteristics across cultures. The content of dreams, and the valuing of them, vary, but the characteristics of dreams—the REMs, the frequency, duration, etc.—are pretty constant in our species (and in other species as well). I found evidence of meditative experience in Stevens' poetry, in his journals and long walks, and in his perceptions.

Thus while Stevens' *intellectual knowledge* of the Orient, his knowledge in "ordinary waking consciousness" as we call that state, was much less than Eliot's or Pound's, as Zhaoming Qian has so ably shown, his *experiential knowledge* of meditative practice, though he would not necessarily have thought it "Oriental," was profound (unlike Eliot's or Pound's), and related to postmodern tendencies.

A "states of consciousness" or experiential approach allows us to define "being nothing" in a non-Western way and to avoid several misunderstandings. The meditative state, unlike dreams, is characterized by an absence of mental and emotional activity, especially those activities present in ordinary consciousness; hence the Chinese phrase "no-mind" or "inaction." This refers to the momentary suspension of a certain cortical busyness and not to a theory or idea such as nihilism. One kind of busyness suspended is the processing of incoming data, as in naming; one smells the cherry blossoms more strongly precisely because the cognitive category, cherry blossom, has not been called up to consciousness. Free of distracting associations, the sensation is pure:

From what tree's bloom  
it comes, I do not know,  
but—this perfume! (Henderson 38)

Basho, in 1688, certainly knew the difference between cherry and plum blossoms. Henderson's translation slightly obscures the drama of ignorance leading to revelation (actually, it is not ignorance but knowledge withheld: "an ignorant man *again*"). Henderson also translates the original, character by character: "What-tree's / blossom / as-for-that / know-not / scent." The core of the statement is "know not . . . smell!" Not general advice; rather, smell this scent, now, without thinking; live in the present of the physical world. This is "suchness," the sensation in itself without taxonomy, without further cortical processing. In "The Snow Man," "not to think of any misery" is often read as turning one's back on the world's tragedy, a regrettable coldness; but it may also be read as the negation of knowledge that is the context of the listener's final enlightenment.

The French symbolists had entered the same room by a different door, to name is to destroy, and Stevens' symbolist distrust of directly referential and stable language reverberated with his experience of "suchness," generating a harmonic unique to his work. The Buddhists consistently place suchness in opposition to naming; in fact, some Buddhist sects view all Buddhist history as a repeated resistance to the reification of nirvana; the construction of any noun, any claim to substantiality, is the problem. Therefore, "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him." The Buddha is a style of consciousness, not a person; all nouns are lies. This is a central part of Nietzsche's admiration of Buddhism, and hence a central part of the modern/postmodern tradition. In the late, long poems, Stevens, instead of trying to speak directly of "nothing" in an expressive (romantic) lyric, takes the more improvisational (and Buddhist, and postmodern) route of repeatedly constructing nouns only to deconstruct them. He keeps meeting the Buddha, and he keeps killing him:

That's it: the more than rational distortion,  
The fiction that results from feeling. Yes, that.

They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne.  
We shall return at twilight from the lecture  
Pleased that the irrational is rational. (CP 406)

Such constructions and deconstructions of certainty are the rule in the long poems: "And yet what good were yesterday's devotions? / I affirm and then at midnight the great cat / Leaps quickly from the fireside and is gone" (CP 264).

Stevens was not only quite adept at entering a state of minimal perception of "suchness"; he also consciously recognized that his meditative see-

ing, his contemplative ability to perceive more by *quieting* the mind and the imagination, provided a clear alternative and even opposition to his romantic tradition of perceiving more by *exciting* the mind and the imagination. In "Description without Place," both imaginative perception and meditative perception have their own language as well as dogma:

There might be, too, a change immenser than  
A poet's metaphors in which being would

Come true, a point in the fire of music where  
Dazzle yields to a clarity and we observe. . . . (CP 341)

"Dazzle" is Stevens' word for imaginative perception that generates a precious rhetoric, a vivid display of metaphorical language created by an excited, remembering mind inventing ideas of order. Metaphor is, at least to Stevens, the perfect analogue to the way fresh cortical associations focus one's perceptions, to the way the self creates, as it receives, the world. Metaphor is "the creation of resemblance by the imagination" (NA 72).

"Clarity," on the other hand, defines meditative perception. As imagination yields to meditative perception, rhetoric becomes bare: "Dazzle yields to a clarity." The tone, instead of being intense, shrinks to an immediacy more static and calm:

Dazzle yields to a clarity and we observe,

And observing is completing and we are content,  
In a world that shrinks to an immediate whole,

That we do not need to understand, complete  
Without secret arrangements of it in the mind. (CP 341)

The "secret arrangements" that are rejected in favor of clarity and wholeness are the imaginative constructs made by an active self. Later in the poem we are told that description is

an expectation, a desire,  
.....

A little different from reality:  
The difference that we make in what we see. . . . (CP 344)

When "Dazzle yields to a clarity," such metaphoric arrangements, originating in "expectation" and "desire" and yielding "difference," are rejected; the meditative world is "immenser than / A poet's metaphors." The meditative condition is one of "being without description" (CP 205),

as he says in "The Latest Freed Man," the world as it appears "Without secret arrangements of it in the mind." The language for this meditative wholeness is abstract; the tone is established not by trembling metaphors of motion and "dazzle," but by simple words of stasis: "being," "point," "clarity," "observe," "content," "whole," "complete." "[O]bserving is completing." A passive self participates in a wholeness not of its own making. This psychology is familiar to the Hindus, as Frits Staal explains:

[The Indian mystic's state] seemed to be a state which is unconditioned and unrelated to previous activity. . . . It is *jñāna* "knowledge" because it does not through activity establish an object, but appears to reflect a situation which was already there and a condition already attained. (179)

Meditative knowledge is the opposite of imaginative knowledge. Metaphor, especially dazzling metaphor, is the quintessential language of the imaginative mind. The clear image or pure ultimate abstraction ("chairs," "nothing," "all," "whole") is the quintessential language of no-mind. "No-mind" is a state "unconditioned and unrelated to previous activity," that is, not one constructed by the historically constituted self. It is a state created precisely by holding off learned personal and historical associations (such as naming). Conversely, imaginative knowledge is inevitably the product of the historically constructed self, "your thoughts, your feelings, / Your beliefs and disbeliefs, your whole peculiar plot" (CP 501).

In the late 1930s Stevens wrote some of his best poems both for and against the imagination. Yet in both kinds of poems, a Buddhist psychology prevails: imagination, critical intellect, and passionate desire are equated, as he makes clear in "The Poems of Our Climate." The "never-resting mind" is allied with "delight," both are immersed in the "imperfect" world of this earth, and that imperfect combination of mind and desire "so hot in us" produces art: "flawed words and stubborn sounds" (CP 194). Thus the intellect, the passions, and the imagination—what Buddhists consider the ego—are lumped together in defining the active self, that humanist, romantic Stevens of tortured creativity that many want to find in every poem. In "The Poems of Our Climate," the whole package of self is endorsed. So also in "The Glass of Water": one sitting among "dogs and dung" would "continue to contend with one's ideas" (CP 198), for "It can never be satisfied, the mind, never" (CP 247).

In Stevens and in Buddhism this link of the imperfect that is "so hot in us" to the imperfect of the material world produces an endless activity: the "never-resting mind" will "continue to contend" forever, just as the law of karma guarantees endless action and reaction with no rest in sight. The imagination, then, is allied with desire and takes us into the ceaseless activity of the cause-and-effect world, as Stevens succinctly and beautifully observes:

But the priest desires. The philosopher desires.

And not to have is the beginning of desire.  
To have what is not is its ancient cycle. (CP 382)

In conceiving of the “evilly compounded, vital I”—“your whole peculiar plot”—as one big heap of never-satisfied thoughts and feelings, Stevens invites not the usual Western questions of whether to have more head and less heart, or vice-versa, or whether to change one idea for a better one, but rather the meditative question of whether to have more or less “I.”

The one poem he took out of sequence to place deliberately at the end of his collected poems, “Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself,” is a gloss on his endless cycling between the perceptions generated by imaginative excitement (ideas about the thing) and the perceptions generated by meditative detachment (the thing itself). “Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself” illustrates why the dazzle of the imagination, no matter how beautiful, conflicts with the clarity of meditative perception. The title seems to be an expressed wish for “the thing itself” instead of “ideas about the thing.” It is hard not to connect “ideas” in the title with “knowledge” in the last line. Even if we grant the beautiful “new knowledge of reality” (CP 534) at the end, we might wonder how this poem has come to be diametrically opposed to the wish expressed in the title. The last line leads back to the title, the title to the first line, the first line to the last: a wonderful example of “the pleasures of merely circulating” (CP 149) that Stevens so often indulged. The title implies a wish for clarity, while the poem winds up with dazzle.

The poem has two highly metaphoric sections. In the first, stanzas 3 and 4, dazzling language is repeatedly negated. The sun is “No longer a battered panache above snow . . .”; it is no longer fantastic, the creation of the man’s dreams: “It was not from the vast ventriloquism / Of sleep’s faded papier-mâché . . .” (CP 534). The man wants to hear the bird, not himself projected. He is tired of being ventriloquist to a dummy world. In the second metaphoric section, the last two stanzas of the poem, the man constructs an elaborate and beautiful choir metaphor around the bird and sun: “chorister . . . c preceded the choir . . . colossal sun . . . choral rings.” Coleridge might have called the first metaphoric section fantastic, the second imaginative. In this poem, surprisingly, they both spell disaster.

Let us consider the plot from a Buddhist and, I would say, from Stevens’ point of view—that is, from the point of view of meditative psychology. A man who longs for something beyond the self (as winter longs for spring) hears a bird’s cry that at first seems like a sound in his mind. But “He knew that he heard it” and he concentrates again on the sound, much as Stevens had done in returning to the cry of the leaves in “The Course of a Particular” three years before. Deliberately denying rhetoric, metaphor, imagination (“No longer a battered panache”), he disavows mind in an

attempt to apprehend the sun itself: "It would have been outside." Almost, but still conditional. He denies mind and fantasy again ("not from . . . sleep[]"), and after these repeated negations the conditional suddenly becomes declarative: "The sun was coming from outside." A very simple line; at this moment the sun is perceived "without description." At this moment there is a minimum of self, a minimum of thought, imagination, and metaphor, and a maximum of clarity.

But then the poem takes another twist: this man starts to think and feel again, and therefore to describe, and therefore, to project his active self onto the world. As the Buddhists would say, he becomes "attached" to his new apprehension of bird and sun, and as his excitement mounts, first with the descriptive metaphor "scrawny," then at the gasp of the dash, then in a fully re-imagined world (bird as "chorister"), desire and dazzle sweep back into the poem:

That scrawny cry—it was  
A chorister whose c preceded the choir.  
It was part of the colossal sun. . . (CP 534)

The man's excitement has led him to make new secret arrangements of his world, to remake the world in the image of his own desire. "The tragedy, however, may have begun, / Again, in the imagination's new beginning" (CP 320). In that excitement and its attendant metaphor he has, by means of desire, fallen back into the world of self. The choral rings of that fall widen until he has—yes—a moving and beautiful metaphor, but alas, he also has again ideas about the thing and not the thing itself.

The plot of the poem, from the Buddhist and from Stevens' point of view, is based on the tragedy of desire: to love the other is to lose it by making it oneself. To the Buddhists, "The identity of the emotion with the object . . . implies that any object whatsoever can have an effect on the individual to any degree and that any sort of emotion on the part of the individual immediately violates the object. Such a mentality which may be called autoerotic, because the individual loves himself in and through the object, is a serious handicap [in Abhidharma doctrine]" (Guenther 6). To the Westerner, union is achieved by love (Bloom: reality becomes a passion); to the Buddhist, union is achieved by detachment. Each tradition considers the other's attempt at union solipsistic. Curiously, the psychology of Stevens' poem is Buddhist: the physical world, the other, is most closely approached by no-mind. As the man becomes excited, he gains ideas about the thing but he loses the thing itself. According to Chung-Yuan, "For Ch'an Buddhists, . . . [intellectual effort] often resulted in mere knowledge about reality, failing to reveal reality itself" (x). But Stevens' poem out-Buddhists the Buddhists, for it makes no such judgment; rather, Stevens placed at the end of his *Collected Poems* a detached appreciation of the endless cycling between the beauty of meditative clarity and the beauty

of imaginative dazzle, an appreciation of how abstinence and desire destroy and create each other.

In between the early "Snow Man" and the late "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself," Stevens had gradually integrated meditative models into his lyric poems and then into his long poems. After 1936, Stevens sharpened his awareness of the opposition between meditative claims and imaginative models. Perhaps he had found words for the opposition in Charles Mauron. The English translation of Mauron's *Aesthetics and Psychology* was sent to Stevens by Virginia and Leonard Woolf from Hogarth Press in 1935, and in December 1936 he used it extensively in his talk "The Irrational Element in Poetry," one of his first critical essays. Stevens' annotated copy at the Huntington Library shows his interest in Mauron's exposition of "contemplation." Mauron made a distinction that is central to Stevens, drawing a line not between the emotional and the intellectual life, but noting instead "another boundary—the right one, in my opinion: that which distinguishes two attitudes of mind, the active and the contemplative" (28). Stevens underlined this paragraph, and on the next page, he underlined "What distinguishes the active from the contemplative spirit is that . . . [the contemplative spirit] is absorbed in the present." On page 31, Stevens wrote in the margin, *not* summarizing the text: "[Therefore the] mark of art is inaction," and at the end of a long annotation on pages 37–38, Stevens added: "Thus the basis of the aesthetic emotion is the aesthetic attitude: contemplation without any idea of making use of the object of contemplation." This, I think, is a gloss on the meditative plot of "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself" (desire and metaphor make use of the object, and therefore to love the other is to make it oneself). Finally, Stevens underlined Mauron's dictum "the perfect artist would admit into his work all inward voices" (64), anticipating the compositional method of the meditative poems. A few pages later, Mauron, discussing the "passive concentration" (65) of the artist, calls for "an extraordinary power of detachment in both artist and spectator" (71).

Possibly in response to Mauron, Stevens by 1938 presented his meditative practice as an antidote to his more famous and visible imaginative practice. Witness "The Man on the Dump," which ends by questioning ultimate authority ("the truth") and then, perhaps, by questioning the formation of any noun: "Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the" (CP 203). That question was followed in the first publication, as in *Collected Poems*, by "On the Road Home": "It was when I said, / 'There is no such thing as the truth,' / That the grapes seemed fatter. / The fox ran out of his hole" (CP 203). Suchness emerges from a willed ignorance (no-mind): "From what tree's bloom / it comes, I do not know, / but—this perfume!" Or, as the symbolists held, to see is to forget the name of what one sees. Certainly by the time of *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* (1942) and *Parts of a World* (1942), Stevens knew what he was doing: the meditative and imaginative modes of seeing, understanding, and enjoying were complementary opposites.

### III

In the long poems after 1938, Stevens went well beyond lyric or romantic expressions of perceiving “something” or “nothing.” However, to discuss meditative structures in the long poems, we need to consider the flow of ordinary consciousness from a Buddhist point of view. On the way to stopping the mind, most Buddhist traditions practice concentration by watching the mind at work (surely one of Stevens’ natural talents). According to Fritz Staal, “In the process of meditation, such deliberation [*vitarka*] initially assists in directing the attention of the mind to its own movements” (129). The reason the meditator watches the “windings round and dodges to and fro” (*CP* 429) of his mind, as Stevens put it, is to perceive the transitory, illusory, and insubstantial quality of ordinary waking consciousness. Stevens in “The Auroras of Autumn” moved from the love of mutability in the physical earth (a “theatre floating through the clouds, / Itself a cloud, although of misted rock / And mountains running like water” [*CP* 416]) to the love of mutability in the world of thought (“the way / A season changes color to no end” [*CP* 416]). Likewise, the Ch’an meditator, said seventh century master Han Shan,

should see all manifestations as clouds floating in the sky—changing and unreal. Not only the outer world, but all habitual thoughts, passions, distractions, and desires within one’s own mind are, likewise, insubstantial, non-concrete, rootless, and floating. Whenever any thought arises, you should try to find its source; never let it go easily or be cheated by it. If you can practice like this, you will be doing some solid work. (Chang 114)

That last note of analytical discipline is interesting: thoughts and passions are perceived as floating *when* one pays strict attention to transitions. Han Shan advises: “*Search out the point where your thoughts arise and disappear. See where a thought arises and where it vanishes. . . .* [L]ook right at the arising point of the distracting thought” (Chang 113–15). Marjorie Perloff notes that Rimbaud said he was “‘present at the birth of [his] thought,’ ” and Perloff sees Rimbaud’s discontinuity as parent to the postmodern style, to “creation of a verbal field where the identity of the ‘I’ is dissolved” (61–62). No one does this better than Stevens, though his postmodern practices have been hidden by his lyric style and the unfortunate tendency of critics to choose teams in a Pound/Stevens opposition. Pound is postmodern in technique and reactionary in consciousness; Stevens is romantic in technique and postmodern in consciousness.

In the lower stages of meditation, then, one becomes aware of the flow of thought and feeling. Since one is not attached to the sufficiency or insufficiency of each thought, the points of arising and disappearing—the

transitions—are unusually obvious. In ordinary consciousness, when we take seriously the *substance* of our thought and feeling, the center of each thought is noted: thought is a noun. In meditative consciousness, when we take seriously the *process* of our thought, the beginning and end of each thought is noted: thought is a verb. In his meditations, Stevens takes the lyric process, the mind in the act of finding what will suffice, one step farther. He detaches himself from the need to direct his consciousness toward the sufficient. He watches the mind going into and out of moments of lyric sufficiency; he then strings those lyrics and anti-lyrics along the threads of long poems.

Such undirected openness in the long poems forces us to consider language as a medium rather than as a statement (after all, “what good were yesterday’s devotions?” [CP 264]) and to read for transitions: where will he go next and how will he get there? But another aspect of these cloud transformations is less obvious and perhaps more important: the voice has no irony. The speaker gives himself, sincerely, to any number of contradictory propositions with wholehearted commitment. Then as each cloud dissolves, the voice lets go. The effect is a remarkable detachment; sometimes one’s “I” disappears, as Stevens noted: “When the mind is like a hall in which thought is like a voice speaking, the voice is always that of some one else” (OP 194).

Stevens writes a poetry of the mind in the act of finding, losing, looking, finding, and losing what will suffice. The process is endless and essentially goalless. Stevens’ long poems are as structurally radical as the “‘field of action’ ” process poems of postmoderns, full of “‘unbridged transitions’ ” and “‘brilliant improvisa[tion]’ ” (Perloff’s terms [156]), but as in jazz, the individual fragments are moving and expressive. Stevens observes his modern consciousness closely, and finds, as might a Buddhist, romantic fragments in a postmodern collage.

As I have suggested, Stevens’ meditative detachment, love of linguistic surface, and tolerance for discontinuity are related to the postmodern tradition, to the radical modernism of Stein and Picasso during Stevens’ formative years after Harvard, and to the post-impressionist Armory Show of 1913 in New York. Nietzsche was the only philosopher Picasso admired and considered relevant to cubism. But beyond Stevens’ affinities with the uncertainties, supreme fictions, and disjunctions of the radical moderns, and beyond his modern affinity with the Nietzsche who used Buddhism to leverage his toppling of authority, one can say with certainty that much of contemporary artistic postmodernism is directly related to Buddhist thought and practice—a claim that begs explanation.

After *Mind of Winter* appeared in 1988, I became increasingly aware of the rich intertwinings of Buddhism and postmodernism in the practices of contemporary artists. In 1989, I worked with Juliette Crump (a modern dancer and professor of dance) on a book of interviews with avant-garde artists for whom meditation was crucial. Many were enthusiastic, because

no one was talking about meditative practice as an integral part of their postmodernism. Those contacted included John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Meredith Monk, Barbara Dilley and others from The Grand Union, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, and W. S. Merwin. Although we decided not to pursue the project, I have a vivid memory of those important artists taking for granted a meditative-postmodern connection in poetry and performance art, while the academy was paying no attention.

What might such a connection be? Certainly many meditative traditions have practiced the deconstruction of self, the deconstruction of linear continuity (thought as a noun, master narratives), the deconstruction of language and other conceptual systems, and conversely, the construction of a state of no-mind as the necessary context for spontaneity, improvisation, action. In consequence, meditative traditions have often experimented with art forms that foreground fragmentation, indeterminacy, chance, improvisation, radical glitches, silence. From John Cage in the 1940s on to the present, many avant-garde artists have used meditative practice to realize and enact a postmodernism of surface, "suchness," and improvisation.

In his 1984 work *Derrida on the Mend*, Robert Magliola wrote on affinities between Nagarjuna's Mahayana Buddhism (about AD 200) and deconstruction. Here is a glimpse of his argument:

I shall argue . . . that Nagarjuna's Middle Path . . . tracks the Derridean trace, and goes "beyond Derrida." . . . Nagarjuna declares: " 'It is' is a notion of eternity. 'It is not' is a nihilistic view. Therefore one who is wise does not have recourse to 'being' or 'non-being.' " We shall see that Nagarjuna takes as his specific task the deconstruction of the principle of identity; and that to accomplish this, he employs the same logical strategy, and often the very same arguments, as Derrida. . . . Nagarjuna's *śūnyatā* ("devoidness") is Derrida's *différance*. . . . (87–89)

A more recent book, Robert Morrison's *Nietzsche and Buddhism* (1997), is an interesting addition to our understanding of the historical roots of modernism. Morrison is well versed in Buddhist texts; unlike other Nietzsche scholars who can comment only on Nietzsche's overt references to Buddhism, Morrison can trace Buddhist doctrines and influences, picked up from Nietzsche's Basel days with Max Muller and from Claes Oldenburg, throughout Nietzsche's work. Morrison's book presents a credible case for more pervasive Buddhist influences than we have noticed or than Nietzsche cared to acknowledge.

Stevens in his late work is one of the most subtle and thorough Nietzschean modernists/postmodernists, celebrating uncertainty and a continuous, self-defining effort itself "ever changing, living in change" (CP 443), without attachment to the results. To this Nietzschean/symbolist/cubist

transmission of doctrines, impressions, and misprisions, Stevens adds both meditative experience and a gift for intellectual detachment that stamps his finest work. Although he retains respect for the lyric mode, for meaning and for narrative, Stevens is also much more radically postmodern than is usually recognized. A Buddhist, meditative approach highlights his oddly serene embrace of radical disjunction, indeterminacy, and improvisation.

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# Late Stevens, Nothingness, and the Orient

ZHAOMING QIAN

WHEN PEOPLE SPEAK of Wallace Stevens' orientalism, they are thinking primarily of his interest in the Far East in the early phase of his career, the phase of "Six Significant Landscapes," *Three Travelers Watching a Sunrise*, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," and "The Snow Man." For many this interest appears to have faded in the poet's last years. A statement Stevens made in 1953 seems to support this view: "I hate orientalism."

To know what Stevens actually meant by this remark, however, we must look into the context in which he pronounced it. This assertion Stevens made on 19 August 1953 to Paule Vidal with regard to the French artist Roger Bezombes: "I lost a great deal of my interest in Bezombes when I read the brochure which you were kind enough to send me. I hate orientalism" (L 796). A week later, it is important to note, the poet confided to Barbara Church why he had changed his mind about Bezombes: "No Bezombes after all. Miss Vidal sent me a brochure about him which he had given her which gave me a painful chill. He is an orientalist and he has ideas about painting from a universal point of view. By this I mean that he thinks that a painting should be neither eastern nor western, but a conglomeration of both, a kind of syncretism. I can only say that I detest orientalism: the sort of thing that Fromentin did, which is the specific thing, although I like it well enough the way Matisse does it" (L 797). So what Stevens abhorred was the idealistic thematic orientalism of a Eugène Fromentin (1820–1876),<sup>1</sup> what Edward Said would call "a European invention" of the Orient (1). This abhorrence clearly had nothing to do with Far Eastern culture.

By 1953 Stevens had befriended Peter H. Lee. His vigorous correspondence with the Korean poet is sufficient proof for his sustained interest in the Far East.<sup>2</sup> Lee's gifts to Stevens—two large scroll paintings from Korea—no doubt rekindled an old passion in him.<sup>3</sup> But with or without Lee, Stevens' meditative creativity was to shine in his final phase.

Stevens' poem "The Rock" (1950) and those afterward, in fact, consist principally of meditations upon the thing itself and nothing. This tendency is revealed in titles: "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour"; "To an Old Philosopher in Rome"; "The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain";

"Looking across the Fields and Watching the Birds Fly"; "The World as Meditation"; "The Dove in Spring"; and, of course, the powerful lyric on the last page of *The Collected Poems*, "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself."

Robert Tompkins is no doubt justified in singling out the title poem of *The Rock* as a fine example of late Stevens' "illimitable insight," which closely parallels those of Buddhism (26): "this poem marks the point of greatest tension in Stevens' thought. Here the being of time imagines itself as *evolving* toward a spiritualization or cure which, if true, must destroy not only its own current self-image but the very basis of that image, time, the apparent opposition by an inhuman other—the 'not yet' " (35). This concept might be amended by saying that the poem's equilibrium between life and illusion, "the houses of mothers" and their "rigid emptiness," "The words spoken" and "nothingness" (CP 525–26) results in a progress toward suppression of both self and other, a motif that, according to Tompkins, cannot be interpreted without reference to "the notions of emptiness (*sunyata*) and suchness (*tathata*), which lie at the heart of Mahayana thought" (35). The concept (nothing/the thing itself) attributed to Buddhism is also helpful in uncovering the meaning of "cure," a key word of the poem:

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

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

For J. Hillis Miller, "a cure of the ground" signifies both "scour[ing] it clean" and "making it solid" (31). For me it suggests at once "emptying it" and "filling it up." Following Miller, the two meanings of "cure" deconstruct one another, whereas following Buddhism they join each other, becoming one.

"The Course of a Particular," more so than "The Rock," presents Stevens' Chan-like insistence on the unity of the thing itself and nothing. The "particular" refers to the "cry" of leaves, while the course is the movement toward its being through persistent purging. The "cry" of the leaves reverberates throughout the poem. The thing itself rises, not "despite every Stevensian rejection of it as pathetic fallacy," as Harold Bloom claims (354), but *because of* every Stevensian rejection of it as "not yet" so. This continuous negating or purging culminates in the final two tercets, where the thing itself combines the nothing and "a busy cry, concerning someone else" is metamorphosed into one that "concerns no one at all":

The leaves cry. It is not a cry of divine attention,  
Nor the smoke-drift of puffed-out heroes, nor human cry.  
It is the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves,

In the absence of fantasia, without meaning more  
Than they are in the final finding of the ear, in the thing  
Itself, until, at last, the cry concerns no one at all. (*OP* 123–24)

We witness a merging of the thing itself and the nothing in “The Snow Man”: “And, nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” (*CP* 10). Its abstraction here has given way to a series of concrete denials and assertions, which signal a marriage of the thing itself and the nothing. To some readers this marriage or equation is hardly thinkable. Yet, in the East, as D. T. Suzuki notes, all schools of Buddhism teach “*śūnyatā* (‘emptiness’) is *tathatā* (‘suchness’), and *tathatā* is *śūnyatā*” (36). Thus a Chinese reader impulsively senses suchness (or the thing itself) and emptiness (or the nothing) in the Tang dynasty poet Bo Juji’s references to “the mountains” and “the Nine Roads”:

A thousand coaches, ten thousand horsemen pass down the  
Nine Roads;  
Turns his head and looks at the mountains,—not one man!  
(Waley 173)

Similarly, the Japanese reader perceives both nothingness and suchness in “water-sound” in Basho’s famous haiku:

Old pond—  
and a frog-jump-in  
water-sound. (Henderson 20)

Surprisingly, in “The Course of a Particular” the trope for the thing itself/the nothing is also a particular sound. Was Stevens thinking of Basho? Had he acquired certain Chan qualities from the Japanese haiku? That is possible. However, Stevens in 1950 professed to Earl Miner a greater interest in Oriental art.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, from Chan art one can learn as much, if not more, about the attainment of the thing itself/the nothing through meditation. An example showing art’s power of conveying the spirit of Chan is *Luohan in Meditation Attended by a Serpent*, a masterpiece on display in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, during and after Stevens’ Cambridge years (fig. 1).<sup>5</sup> The painting illustrates the very moment a Luohan (a Buddhist saint who remains in the human world) perceives the thing itself in meditative nothingness. The suchness in the “cry” of waves cannot be attained without his denial of sight. The Luohan has shunned all distractions. The stirring of the serpent in front of him and the “cry” of the leaves by his side, for instance, are not reflected in his halo.

Similarly relevant to Stevens’ recurrent motif of nothingness is Bunsei’s *Landscape* (fig. 2), another Boston masterpiece to which Stevens had access. We might see the painting as an example of “pictorial self-reference,”



Fig. 1. *Luohan in Meditation Attended by a Serpent*. Zhou Jichang, Chinese, second half of 12<sup>th</sup> century. Hanging scroll mounted as panel; ink and color on silk. Denman Waldo Ross Collection. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Fig. 2. *Landscape*. Bunsei, Japanese, active mid-15<sup>th</sup> century. Hanging scroll; ink and light colors on paper. Chinese and Japanese Special Fund. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

focusing on the relation between the perceiver and the perceived.<sup>6</sup> From the Western standpoint, the figure in the picture cannot be the painter/perceiver because his face is turned away from that scene. From the Chan standpoint, nonetheless, the painter/perceiver absolutely needs this “turning away” (“emptying out”) to achieve the thing itself/the nothing of the scene. The “turning away,” like the denying of sight in the Luohan painting, precisely distinguishes a work as a Chan masterpiece. Further, one may wonder why the figure is positioned under a roof. My answer is that such a positioning may lead us to imagine him at once as the painter and as the collector of the painting. This interpretation is based on the Daoist view that art can “speak” on nature’s behalf. Guo Xi, a spokesman of this theory, maintains that an artist’s business is to enable those who wish to “enjoy a life amidst the luxuries of nature” but “are debarred from indulging in such pleasures” to “behold the grandeur of nature without stepping out of their houses.”<sup>7</sup>

As early as 1911 Stevens was fascinated by Guo Xi’s essay on “The Noble Features of the Forest and the Stream” that expressed once and for all that outlook. It is amazing that four decades after his discovery of Guo Xi, the eleventh-century art critic’s sentiment resurfaces in “The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain”:

There it was, word for word,  
The poem that took the place of a mountain.

He breathed its oxygen,  
Even when the book lay turned in the dust of his table.

It reminded him how he had needed  
A place to go to in his own direction,

How he had recomposed the pines,  
Shifted the rocks and picked his way among clouds,

For the outlook that would be right,  
Where he would be complete in an unexplained completion:

The exact rock where his inexactnesses  
Would discover, at last, the view toward which they had edged,

Where he could lie and, gazing down at the sea,  
Recognize his unique and solitary home. (CP 512)

That is the mode of Guo Xi, whose painting took the place of mountains, streams, clouds, rocks, and pines. Bunsei’s *Landscape*, one of the thousands of pictures in Guo Xi’s tradition, shows that a scene affects its viewer/

perceiver even when his face is turned away from it. Similarly, as Daniel Schwarz remarks, Stevens' poem affects its reader, "Even when he is not reading it" (217): "He breathed its oxygen, / Even when the book lay turned in the dust of his table." Stevens is once more returning to "The Snow Man," whose character, like a Chan meditator, perceives not with his eyes but with his ears, not with his ears but with his mind, not with his mind but with an achieved state of no mind.

Late Stevens was a far more brilliant and complex poet than the Stevens of "The Snow Man," however. A. Walton Litz, with the acutest eye for stylistic changes, attests that the impersonality of "The Snow Man" is not as rigid as that of "The Course of a Particular" (293). An intense impersonal stance, though vital, in my view, is not Stevens' greatest achievement in the meditative mode. In his final years, I would argue, Stevens was able to enact within the limited space of a short lyric something like a debate between meditative sublimity and imaginative sublimity. This double representation, a greater success than intensified impersonality or sharpened clarity, is nowhere more evident than in "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself." The poem opens remarkably with a man's meditative experience:

At the earliest ending of winter,  
In March, a scrawny cry from outside  
Seemed like a sound in his mind.

He knew that he heard it,  
A bird's cry, at daylight or before,  
In the early March wind.

The sun was rising at six,  
No longer a battered panache above snow . . .  
It would have been outside.

It was not from the vast ventriloquism  
Of sleep's faded papier-mâché . . .  
The sun was coming from outside.

Stevens' earlier meditative poems present vivid imaginative moments only to be dismissed and replaced by suchness/ nothingness. By contrast, "Not Ideas about the Thing," despite its declaration of a bias for the thing itself in the title, concludes with a beautiful epiphany that is not the thing itself but ideas about the thing:

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)

William Bevis aptly suggests “The last line leads back to the title, the title to the first line, the first line to the last” (151). This way one can avoid catching an ironical tone. In the poem’s opening and middle sections, the man’s perception has transformed through a series of denials (“No longer . . .”; “It was not . . .”) from an idea about the thing (“a scrawny cry from outside / Seemed like a sound in his mind”) to the thing itself (“A bird’s cry, at daylight or before . . .”). Why does Stevens choose not to close at the end of the fourth tercet? Why must he go on to offer the beautiful epiphany? Does he desire to express a greater yearning for imaginative sublimity? If so, he ought to have named the poem differently. What he wants to show, I think, is the ephemeral nature of the thing itself. That is to say, he wants to demonstrate how easily one can lose what has been gained. Bevis drives this point home when he comments that “The plot of the poem, from the Buddhist and from Stevens’ point of view, is based on the tragedy of desire: to love the other is to lose it by making it oneself” (153).

“Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself” with a sudden swerve from meditation to imagination marks a giant leap forward in Stevens’ appreciation of Chan Buddhism. Near the end of his career, Stevens in fact was able to present double representation in a variety of ways. “A Clear Day and No Memories,” the poet’s ultimate vision, for example, opens with extraordinary elements of the imagination:

No soldiers in the scenery,  
No thoughts of people now dead,  
As they were fifty years ago:  
Young and living in a live air,  
Young and walking in the sunshine,  
Bending in blue dresses to touch something—  
Today the mind is not part of the weather.

We are not to be distracted by the negatives—“No Memories . . .”; “No soldiers . . .”; “No thoughts. . .” They are unlike those in, say, “The Latest Freed Man,” where the hero dismisses not splendid memories but abstract ideas. One may want to call them litotes. However, this possibility is questioned first by the line “Today the mind is not part of the weather,” and then by further negations in the second half of the poem:

Today the air is clear of everything.  
It has no knowledge except of nothingness  
And it flows over us without meanings,

As if none of us had ever been here before  
And are not now: in this shallow spectacle,  
This invisible activity, this sense. (OP 138–39)

Is it uncharacteristic of Chan, one wonders, to recall splendid memories prior to the attainment of the thing itself/nothing? Not really. Chan meditation seldom begins with denial of abstract ideas. More often it starts with denial of concrete thoughts. The Luohan painting in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, as a Chan masterpiece elects to present the “unnoticed” serpent and leaves in the foreground. In Basho’s haiku, enlightenment or *satori* resides in the contrast between the old pond and the sudden splash of water caused by a frog leaping in. Similarly, the thing itself in “A Clear Day and No Memories” is made only fiercer following the speaker’s rejection of spontaneous, dazzling memories.

Critics who are quick to notice a chilling tone in “A Clear Day and No Memories” seem slow in recognizing a strong sense of elation in theme. In a letter to Peter Lee written four months before he died, it is worth noting, Stevens found it necessary to allude, in a personal way, to his final vision that unites joy and desolation: “the rabbits are definitely out of their holes for the season; the robins are back; the doves have returned from Korea and some of them sit on our chimney before sunrise and tell each other how happy they are in the most melancholy tones. Robins and doves are both early risers and are connoisseurs of daylight before the actual presence of the sun coarsens it” (L 879). The robins and doves are tropes for Stevens himself and the young Korean poet. As “early risers” they recall “A Clear Day,” “Not Ideas,” and “The Dove in Spring.” It seems that Stevens had a sense that he owed much of his final lyrics’ sensibility to the Orient, and it is logical that he felt comfortable sharing his insight with someone from Korea.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to Mark Jones, Roger Bezombes (b. 1913), educated in Paris at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, “worked principally as a painter, adopting the saturated colours of Henri Matisse in landscapes and figure studies often based on observation of ‘exotic’ cultures, notably Mediterranean and North African” (902). Eugène Fromentin (1820–1876), according to James Thompson, studied with the Neo-classical landscapist Jean-Charles-Joseph Remond (1795–1875), traveled to and stayed long in Algeria, and “establish[ed] himself as an Orientalist, exhibiting 11 Algerian works in the 1850–51 Salon.” His prolific writings based on his North African experiences later served to strengthen his position as “a leading Orientalist” (800–801).

<sup>2</sup> See eleven letters from Stevens to Peter Lee, 21 March 1951 to 1 April 1955 (L 711, 741–42, 826–27, 839–40, 840, 845–46, 855–56, 862–63, 865–66, 872–73, 879).

<sup>3</sup> See Stevens to Peter Lee, 26 February 1952 and 4 January 1955 (*L* 741–42; 865–66). For a reproduction of the first scroll painting, courtesy of Peter and Gail Hanchak, see the front cover of *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 21.2 (Fall 1997).

<sup>4</sup> For Stevens' acknowledgment of "influence by Chinese and Japanese lyrics," see Stevens to Ronald Lane Latimer, 5 November 1935 (*L* 291). For his denial of haiku as an important influence, see Stevens to Earl Miner, 30 November 1950 (*L* 291 n 9).

<sup>5</sup> On Stevens and the Oriental Wing of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, see Qian 129–32.

<sup>6</sup> Compare W. T. J. Mitchell's characterization of Velazquez's *Las Meninas* as "an encyclopedic labyrinth of pictorial self-reference, representing the interplay between the beholder, the producer, and the object or model of representation as a complex cycle of exchanges and substitutions" (58). In *Las Meninas* the painter is glancing from the model to his unfinished painting.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted from Stevens' newspaper clipping enclosed in his 20 August 1911 letter to his wife (Huntington: WAS 1926). The text of the clipping is printed in Qian 140 n 17.

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# Teaching Stevens in China

MILTON J. BATES

CHEN HUI PAUSED for a moment, his brush suspended over the long strip of gold-flecked paper draped across the kitchen table. Then the brush touched the upper right corner of the paper and the ink began to flow in jet black strokes, character after character in a long column, then another column to the left of the first and another to the left of the second. His hand performed an intricate ballet, the wrist turning this way to bring the wide base of the brush against the paper, that way to deploy the slender tip. Every two or three strokes he dipped his brush in the bowl of freshly mixed ink. On reaching the bottom left corner of the strip, he stood back to examine his work. "It is very beautiful," he said, in self-effacing tribute to the artifact. Then he signed the scroll with his personal chops, using one for the lower left and another for the upper right. The red ink of the seals contrasted sharply with the black ink of the characters.

Chen Hui is a master of *shufa*, the traditional Chinese art known in the West as calligraphy. I had met him through a mutual friend to whom he had appealed for help with a speech he was to deliver in August 2000 at an Asian arts conference in Los Angeles. My contribution was modest: I merely read the speech into a tape recorder so that he could practice his English pronunciation. In return, in the generous manner of the Chinese, he offered to teach me *shufa*. I declined with regret, knowing that I lacked the time and probably the talent to advance very far in the art.

There was, however, one project that he could help me with. More on this in a moment. I had come to China as a Fulbright lecturer in February 2000, at the beginning of the auspicious Year of the Dragon. I was assigned to Beijing Foreign Studies University, where I taught three courses: an undergraduate survey of American literature since 1900, a graduate course in American poetry from Whitman to Plath, and a graduate course in modern American fiction. My students were among China's best and brightest. Unlike Beijing and Qinghua Universities, China's premier institutions of higher education, BFSU is not a comprehensive university. It specializes in foreign languages and literatures, and is designated a "key institution" for English studies by China's Ministry of Education.

BFSU students who major in English learn to read and write the language nearly as well as many American students. Like most people acquiring a new language, they have more difficulty comprehending spoken English and speaking it themselves. Most were nonetheless able to understand my lectures, resorting only occasionally to calculator-like pocket translators for unfamiliar words. I was also lucky in another respect. Americans who teach in China often lament the difficulty of generating class discussion due to the students' uncertain language skills and cultural inhibitions. However, all three of my classes enrolled a critical mass of students who were willing to walk the English tightrope without a net. Their daring and relative fluency made my job easy, as I rediscovered whenever I lectured at a university outside Beijing or even, on one occasion, at Beijing University.

I nevertheless wondered how to introduce Chinese students to some of the more challenging modern authors. Ezra Pound was a natural because I could begin with his translations of classical Chinese poems and his edition of Ernest Fenollosa's "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry." But what about Langston Hughes, Eliot, Faulkner, and Stevens? For each of these I had to develop an effective teaching strategy, ultimately devoting more preparation time to Stevens than to the others.

I decided to concentrate on a small number of Stevens poems in both the undergraduate survey and the graduate poetry class. In the undergraduate course we spent three class periods, each lasting two hours, on "Anecdote of the Jar," "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," and "The Emperor of Ice-Cream." In the graduate course we spent two class periods on "Thirteen Ways" and "Sunday Morning." I was counting on "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" to bridge the culture gap, to orient me to Chinese traditional poetry and to orient the students, so to speak, to American poetic modernism.

Several weeks before we took up Stevens, I had a Chinese colleague translate the first stanza of "Thirteen Ways" into Chinese. Despite countless hours spent studying Mandarin, I had mastered only enough of the language to order meals and get where I needed to go by taxi and public transportation. Even then I couldn't count on being understood. Once, with a taxi driver, I managed to carry on a conversation for ten or fifteen minutes. My confidence soared until we hit an impasse. As I understood it, he had asked me about the best MBA programs in the United States. When I suggested a few schools, he nodded noncommittally and asked another question. I didn't get it. At the next traffic light he pulled out a copy of the *People's Daily*, turned to the sports section, and pointed to a familiar logo. That's when I remembered that the National Basketball Association (NBA) playoffs were in progress back home.

So I didn't attempt my own translation of "Thirteen Ways." Though my colleague's rendering was competent, as far as I could tell, I questioned her choice of *yanbage* for "blackbird." According to my dictionary,

a *yanbage* is a kind of swallow. After consulting several Chinese field guides in bookstores and viewing a rather shrunken specimen in the Beijing Museum of Natural History, I concluded that the bird known in China as a blackbird is a member of the thrush family, *Turdus merula*. Stevens' blackbird, I've always assumed, is a Brewer's Blackbird (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*), a Rusty Blackbird (*Euphagus carolinus*), or a Red-Winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*), though none of these is associated with mountain landscapes. I decided to finesse the problem by substituting *heiniào* (literally, "black bird") for *yanbage*.

When I mentioned my ornithological quandary in the graduate class, a student recalled that a professor at her undergraduate institution, Yunnan University, had published a translation of "Thirteen Ways." That professor proved to be Fei Bai, whose anthology *Oceanus Poeticae* includes Chinese translations of poems written in English, Russian, and several other languages. Stevens is represented by "Thirteen Ways," "Anecdote of the Jar," and "A Room on a Garden" (*Oceanus* 2: 1327–39). I obtained a copy of Professor Fei Bai's translation and found that he, too, calls Stevens' bird a *heiniào*.

I adopted Fei Bai's translation for use in my classes, except for one phrase from my colleague's rendering. To my unpracticed ear, her *zai . . . zhong* ("in the middle") describes the blackbird's position with respect to the mountains better than his *zai . . . jian* ("in the interval"). Here, beside the English first stanza of "Thirteen Ways," is a Chinese translation in characters and pinyin romanization:

Among twenty snowy mountains,

The only moving thing

Was the eye of the blackbird.

在二十座雪山中，

Zài èr shí zuò xuěshān zhōng,

唯一活动的东西

Wéiyī huódòng de dōngxī

是黑鸟的眼。

Shì hēiniǎo de yǎn.

This is where Chen Hui was able to help me. By transcribing the Chinese characters onto a scroll, he created not only a handsome *shufa* but also a visual aid. When the undergraduates arrived for our first class on Wallace Stevens they saw a large map of the United States tacked to the top of the chalkboard. No surprise there: we always located writers geographically before considering their work. But the scroll beside the map was a bit unsettling, unfamiliar matter in a familiar medium. Their eyes kept drifting toward it as I spoke briefly about Stevens' life, his place in American literature, and his interest in Asian culture. We spent most of the first hour on "Anecdote of the Jar" before turning to "Thirteen Ways."

I opened our discussion of the latter by inviting a student to read the first stanza from the scroll. Then I asked how the juxtaposition represented in those lines—the blackbird’s eye amid twenty snowy mountains—compares with the juxtaposition we had just considered, the jar in Tennessee. Besides the differences in scale and coloration, they noticed that in “Thirteen Ways” an inert landscape surrounds a vital center, whereas in “Anecdote” a vital landscape surrounds an inert jar. Furthermore, the blackbird’s eye, as a natural phenomenon rather than an artifact, requires no human agent to place it among the mountains.

So what does it *mean*, this spark of life in the midst of forbidding circumstances? Here the students were baffled, which was just as well, since I wanted to address the question in relation to the poem as a whole. I proposed that we break the class of twenty-five into four groups, each responsible for three of the remaining twelve stanzas.<sup>1</sup> Each group was to appoint a member to read the stanzas aloud to the class and another to report their understanding of what the lines are “about.” I allowed the room to buzz and boil in Chinese for ten minutes as I circulated among the groups, answering questions about the meaning of peculiar words such as “Haddam” and “bawd.” Then I interrupted their deliberations and asked the groups to assign a second reporter, a “meta-reporter,” to describe the *process* by which they had arrived at their conclusions, noting especially any blind alleys or unproductive lines of inquiry.

Ten minutes later, we were ready for the readings and reports. After the first group’s reader refreshed our memory of stanzas II–IV, their first reporter announced the themes that they had discovered: unity in multiplicity, the individual’s place in a larger process, and multiple perspectives. I wrote these on the chalkboard, not in a column but as spokes radiating from the word “blackbird.” Then we turned our attention to the second reporter. She opened by remarking that the blackbird is “obviously a symbol,” a throwaway line that elicited laughter from the rest of the class. Actually, she said, correcting herself, the group had begun by assuming that the bird is a symbol. But when they couldn’t decide what it symbolizes they came to see it as an objective correlative, a form of signification that we had discussed in connection with Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.”

There we had to suspend our discussion of “Thirteen Ways” until the next class. It was not quite noon, and we all understood that the more edible dishes would disappear from the university cafeteria within fifteen minutes. I was all the more gratified, therefore, that a couple of students remained after class to discuss stanza IV,

A man and a woman  
Are one.  
A man and a woman and a blackbird  
Are one.

In response to the group report I had suggested that the blackbird is an intrusive element, one that destabilizes the harmony of man and woman. Two is company, three a crowd. The students argued, just as plausibly, that the blackbird introduces a more inclusive harmony; it is the circle that encloses the yin and yang. Perhaps it was Stevens' simple yet suggestive language that gave them the confidence to "teach the officer" and thus complete the triad of learning recommended in Mao's Little Red Book: "officers teach soldiers, soldiers teach officers and the soldiers teach each other" (93).

During the next class we resumed the group reports, adding thematic spokes to the blackbird hub and noting the repetition of motifs such as snow and ice and birds in flight. According to the meta-reporters, the remaining groups adopted much the same strategy. They chose one stanza among the three and used it to approach the others, in effect having the poem explicate itself. Thus the contrast between the blackbird and the imaginary golden birds in stanza VII suggested that stanzas V and VI likewise represent polarities—whistling versus inflections and innuendoes, bright icicles versus dark shadow. Stanza XII, "The river is moving. / The blackbird must be flying," reminded them of a Chinese proverb about the flow of the natural world. Is there any situation for which the Chinese do not have a proverb?

After the last group report, I led them through a series of questions that I often use in my American classroom to wrap up discussions of the poem: *Does the order of the stanzas matter?* (Though the poem begins and ends with appropriate images, most of its stanzas could be rearranged without altering the effect—hence the "wheel" diagram rather than a linear model of its structure.) *Would we approach the poem differently if it were called "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Nightingale (or Lark/Dove/Swan/Raven)"?* (Except for the four-and-twenty blackbirds in a familiar nursery rhyme, blackbirds have no literary history to speak of. You have to take them as you find them, without preconceptions about their meaning.) *What is the feeling elicited by the poem as a whole?* (Stevens described the poem as a collection of sensations, including sensations as diverse as compulsion, spontaneous pleasure, and despair [L 251, 340]. American students generally find the poem ominous, like the first half-hour of Alfred Hitchcock's film *The Birds*, and the Chinese students reported similar feelings.) Finally, *what does the poem mean?* (The poem defies us to reduce it to a plot, an argument, or a philosophical proposition, thereby forcing us to reconsider what we mean by "meaning.")

Here I usually move on to another poem. But this was China, and I couldn't resist another experiment. For each author I had provided the students with a couple of topics on which they could write a brief essay related to the assigned readings. They were required to submit three essays in the course of the semester. Several students chose to write on the topic for "Thirteen Ways," which invited them to compare all or part of

Stevens' poem with a favorite classical Chinese poem. Reviewing the essays after our first class, I found that they had likened various stanzas to poems by Li Bai (known to Ezra Pound as Li Po), Ma Zhiyuan, and Ye Shaoweng.

One student compared two stanzas of "Thirteen Ways" with a couple of Tang Dynasty poems. Following our discussion of "Thirteen Ways," I returned her essay and asked her to read the poem that she had compared with stanza I. She stood and recited "River in the Snow" by Liu Zongyuan (773–819 A.D.), reproduced here in an English translation:

Over a thousand mountains the winging birds have  
disappeared.  
Throughout ten thousand paths, no trace of humankind.  
In a solitary boat,  
    straw hat and cape,  
        an old man fishes alone—  
Cold river in the snow. (*100 Tang* 169)

Two features of her performance struck me as remarkable. First, she recited without glancing at the printed page. Second, many of the students were smiling in recognition or silently mouthing the words. Chinese textbooks use classical poetry to teach the characters, and children memorize dozens of classical poems while still in elementary school. Consequently, as adults they can draw upon these treasures of the Tang and Song Dynasties whenever and wherever they wish. Memorizing poetry, once so much a part of American pedagogy, has succumbed to educational reform. But in sparing our students the drudgery of rote learning we may also deny them an important part of their cultural heritage.

Our discussion of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" in the graduate class generally followed the discussion in the undergraduate class, with one difference. Whereas the undergraduates related the themes of the poem to Chinese proverbs, the graduate students, who were at least a year older than the undergraduates and more deeply committed to their field of study, related them to English antecedents. Thus they associated the golden birds in stanza VII with the golden bird in Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" and invoked Keats's Grecian urn as a contrast to the flowing river and flying bird in stanza XII. At least in certain Chinese circles, Western high culture has almost as much influence as Western popular culture.

Because we had so little time to spend on Stevens in class, I decided to corrupt the graduate students further by throwing a "translation party" in the apartment where my wife and I lived on campus. As an admission ticket, each had to bring a translation of "The Snow Man" into Chinese. Before taking up those translations on the appointed evening, we attended to another weighty matter: the choice of toppings for our Domino's piz-

zas. By calling in the order we placed a tight limit on the evening's serious business, for in Beijing the pizza chain still promises thirty-minute delivery. That guarantee, long since discontinued in the United States, is the more impressive because Beijing franchises deliver their product on silver bicycles with special pizza "safes" mounted over the rear wheel. Domino's couriers are easy to spot as they whiz past the stately Flying Pigeons and Phoenixes in the bike lanes, for they are the only cyclists wearing helmets.

While waiting for the refreshments to arrive, the students took turns reading their translations. One of these, by Zhang Ying, is reproduced below.<sup>2</sup> Each rendering of "The Snow Man" elicited spontaneous responses from the group, who pronounced one "philosophical" and characterized a couple of the others as "opposites" in their approach to the poem. When I pressed for more specific judgments about the accuracy of the translations, we found ourselves discussing the central critical issues raised by the poem—whether, for example, the snow man's vision is represented negatively or positively, and how the perspective of the poem's speaker can be distinguished from that of the snow man. We rediscovered, in short, what Ezra Pound had in mind when he included translation among the forms of criticism (74). A half-hour passed and the better part of another before we were interrupted by a knock on the door and the arrival of an apologetic deliveryman. We set aside our "Snow Man" translations for the time being, lacking the "mind of winter" to persist in the face of temptation.

What, then, did I learn from trying to teach Stevens in China? First, that Stevensian phrases such as "concupiscent curds" ("The Emperor of Ice-Cream") and "of a port in air" ("Anecdote of the Jar") are, predictably, as baffling to the Chinese as they are to native speakers of English. For the most part, however, his poetry is not beyond the reach of students who read him in their second or third language. He was surprisingly accessible to the bright and well-prepared students whom it was my privilege to teach. Second, although I anticipated having to spend considerable time on cultural background—explaining, for example, allusions to the Bible and classical mythology—I was spared the trouble. The Chinese pride themselves in knowing Western culture better than Westerners know Asian culture. Steeped in historical memories of imperial power and still surrounded by monuments of imperial style, they have arguably a richer appreciation of a poem such as "The Emperor of Ice-Cream." Their own poetic tradition has also prepared them well for Stevens' metonymic method, whereby he uses carefully selected details to suggest larger patterns.

Chinese students have another, more substantial advantage over today's American students: they are not afraid of poetry. From the emperors and generals of ancient dynasties to Mao Zedong, Chinese leaders have sought distinction as poets as well as men of public affairs. Today, poetry may be less central to Chinese culture than it once was. But it remains on display everywhere—written on scrolls and in the margins of paintings, printed

“The Snow Man”  
Translated by Zhang Ying 张颖

## 雪人

人须有冬之心境  
才能欣赏雪凝的松枝和寒霜，  
须久处寒冻

始领略冰封凌乱的杜松  
和在元月幽远日光里显得粗糙的云杉  
而不觉一丝凄苦，

风啸也罢，叶摇也罢，  
是游走在天地间  
拂向同一荒凉角落同样的风，

因那雪中聆听的人儿  
全不由自己  
看到了雪中的一切和虚无。

on ties and tee-shirts, etched into stone tablets in the city parks, even carved into the ledges and waterfalls of Mount Tai and Yellow Mountain. Consequently, the Chinese regard poetic speech as a perfectly natural, indeed as a normative, mode of expression. They believe that their language is especially suited for poetry due to the ambiguities arising from its uninflected nouns and verbs. As the scholar-poet Lu Zhiwei observes in a lecture on Chinese poetry, “We have found very little use for declensions and conjugations. We have no grammar” (154).<sup>3</sup>

On the first day of class I asked the students to write down what they hoped to accomplish during the semester. Many mentioned “insight into American culture” as an important objective, which reminded me of the shrewd caveat with which Lu concludes his lecture. “I may hope to make you understand our culture, perhaps,” he tells his American audience;

“but never our vulgarity” (166). The opposite has generally prevailed in American cultural exchange. We have communicated our vulgarity, in all its vigor and tawdriness, more successfully than our high culture. Stevens’ poetry exemplifies the sort of culture that occasionally flowers, lotus-like, from the muck of our vulgarity.

The undergraduates, who were mostly seniors, found Stevens an attractive figure because he managed to combine careers in business and literature, whereas they were having to choose between them. Though a couple of the seniors went on to graduate school in literature, most went into business, where their facility in English is rewarded handsomely in today’s China. The graduate students had decided, tentatively at least, on the road less traveled. As much as they enjoyed Stevens’ poetry, they doubted his Americanness. At the end of the semester I asked them to write an essay in which they constructed their ideal American poet, drawing on specific qualities in the ten poets whom we had studied. Though the students were allowed to construe “ideal” any way they wished—to mean, for example, “quintessential,” “consummate,” or “most admirable”—few mentioned Stevens in their composites. His “religious metaphysical thinking” and “self-mocking irony” figured in just a couple of the ideals, which were otherwise more indebted to Whitman and Frost, poets whose ties to our vulgarity are more obvious.

Stevens may not be the first poet who comes to mind when my Chinese students think of American literature. But they will probably never forget the blackbird surrounded by twenty snowy mountains, the jar in Tennessee, the cigar-maker’s ice cream, or the ambiguous undulations of pigeons’ wings. Those images now belong to imaginations already stocked with the riches of Chinese poetry. Who knows? Perhaps a few will delve further into Stevens’ work. If so, I wonder what they will make of that line in “The Comedian as the Letter C” where Crispin concludes that his hankering for an alien aesthetic is “Wrong as a divagation to Peking” (*CP* 34). Beijing may well have been wrong for Crispin, who was trying to put down roots in Carolina. But for a small group of us it was just right, a place where we could meet to reflect, with Stevens’ help, on the intersections of two poetic traditions.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>In her essay “How Stevens Teaches Us to Read,” Lauren Rusk recounts a similar use of breakout groups when teaching the poem.

<sup>2</sup>I am grateful to Zhaoming Qian for suggesting improvements to Zhang Ying’s translation. See Haft for two other Chinese translations of “The Snow Man.”

<sup>3</sup>Professor Lu discusses the relationship between linguistic features of the Chinese language and Chinese poetry in Lecture Five, “Writing in the Vernacular” (152–66).

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# Wallace Stevens in Poland

JACEK GUTOROW

## I

IN HIS *WYPISY Z KSIĄG UŻYTECZNYCH* (*Extracts from the Beneficial Books*, a selection of Polish translations of poems from all over the world), the Nobel Prize winner Czesław Miłosz writes: “Stevens was a typically twentieth-century poet, i.e. he treated all the beliefs and religions of mankind as Supreme Fiction. It is only art (for Stevens: poetry) which is left as the great fancy of our species, that which we weave out of ourselves just as the silkworm produces its thread of silk. Yet Stevens was under the great influence of the scientific *Weltanschauung* of his age, and his examination of the visible world is affected by the scientific method” (87; my translation). *Extracts from the Beneficial Books* includes two of Stevens’ poems translated by Miłosz: “The Poems of Our Climate” and “Study of Two Pears.” The former is preceded by the following comment: “I am not going to hide my disapproval of Stevens’ philosophy. If someone likes the poem very much, I suggest thinking about the reasons of my disapproval” (85; my translation).

Miłosz’s opinion may be taken to reflect the general attitude toward Stevens in Poland. Perhaps this opinion is connected with the historical and political context in which Polish poetry has traditionally been placed and perceived. On the one hand, poetry in Poland has often been approached as a socio-political vehicle; its political dimension was a decisive criterion for many literary and non-literary critics. On the other hand, the disaster of the Second World War caused both poets and critics to feel that poetry was no longer able to provide aesthetic pleasure. In 1945, Miłosz himself published a book of poems entitled *Ocalenie* (*Salvation*) in which he rejected his own symbolist and aestheticist past and proclaimed that poetry would bring spiritual salvation to people and nations. It is not entirely surprising, then, that poets like Stevens or Pound were long treated with suspicion, and that their poems as well as poetical credos were perceived as even childish and naïve. The modernist dream of salvation through *aesthetic* investigations was strongly criticized as socially irrelevant. According to Miłosz and many other European poets in the immediate postwar decades, literature after Auschwitz should strive to be a

realistic and uninflected expression of the atrocities of war. Stevens' "Prose statement on the poetry of war," for instance, would have been read by poets like Miłosz as a typical example of trivial and aimless aestheticism. All in all, Polish poets and critics seemed to avoid Stevens; they inclined rather toward the Eliot of "The Waste Land" and the Auden of "September 1, 1939."

## II

There was another reason why Stevens' poems were not being translated into Polish in the first years after the Second World War. During the first post-war decade (more particularly from 1947 to 1956), Polish poets and translators were bound by the severe directives of the newly introduced Socialist Realism. Any translations of Western literature were forbidden. Although we should not overstate the importance of this limitation, we should nevertheless remember that a more general Polish reception of Stevens could start only after the decrees of Socialist Realism had been revoked. It is significant, in this respect, that the revival of Western literature after 1956 was not so much a recognition of that literature itself as a reaction to previous restrictions. In fact, Polish readers and critics were not prepared to acknowledge and accept new (modernist) literature. Writers like Joyce or Pound were generally rejected as obscure and incomprehensible. The only exception to this anti-modernism occurred with the advent of the Theater of the Absurd, which became popular as a reflection of the socio-political situation in Poland and found such followers as Gombrowicz and Mrożek. Generally, however, the ambivalence with which the first translations of French, English, and American poems and novels were met was due to the socio-political and historical rather than to any literary context.

As far as American poetry was concerned, it was mainly Eliot who came to be seen as the mouthpiece of Western culture. Again, Miłosz was a decisive influence. His translations of "The Waste Land" and of "Ash-Wednesday," published in the 1940s, would cast a long shadow upon the Polish reception of Anglo-Saxon modernism. By the end of the 1950s and throughout the 1960s, for instance, Eliot's later poetry was being adapted to the needs of the Polish Neo-Classical School, which saw Eliot as its father. Generally speaking, modernist poetry was recognized and appreciated by those poets who regarded themselves as reviving Neo-Classical ideals.<sup>1</sup> No wonder these people preferred Eliot to Pound and tended to reject Stevens, whose links to classicism were not so obvious, especially to non-English readers. As a result, the sixties witnessed a growing popularity of the later Eliot in Poland and a more and more troubling absence of Pound, Stevens, Williams, or Marianne Moore.

To be sure, the first translations of Stevens' poems were published already shortly after 1956. These were done by Adam Czerniawski, Waclaw Iwaniuk, Artur Międzyrzeczki, and some others. But the translations were

exceptions and resulted principally from a sudden interest in anything coming from beyond the Iron Curtain (even if some of the translators lived in England or France and, consequently, translations were published there). To put things more simply, one could say that Stevens was translated mainly because he was an American, not because his poems were somehow important to the translators. What is more, these translators clearly had problems with the poetry and the language itself. As might be expected, Stevens' poetry did not prove easy to convert to Polish. Poetry as preoccupied with language and its mechanisms as Stevens' requires a special and competent kind of translator, and sometimes short-circuits any attempts to render it in another language. We have to remember that the first translators of Stevens' poems were mainly poets whose working knowledge of English was limited. The result of all this was that after 1956 poets either avoided Stevens or published translations whose quality was often poor. Gradually, Stevens thus earned a reputation as an obscure and almost nonsensical poet. At the same time Eliot and, to some extent, Pound were being perceived as the leading figures in the Anglo-Saxon poetry of the twentieth century.

### III

Nineteen-sixty-nine marked the most significant attempt until recently at familiarizing Polish readers with the poetry of Wallace Stevens. In this year Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz published his translations of Stevens' poems in a separate book. The volume included twenty-two poems—among them "Sunday Morning" in full, "Evening without Angels," canto XXII of "The Man with the Blue Guitar," "The Poems of Our Climate," "Of Modern Poetry," and six cantos from "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction"—as well as a short introduction written by Rymkiewicz himself. The fact that Rymkiewicz was regarded at the time as one of the leaders of the Neo-Classical School clearly determined the shape of his edition of Stevens. The selection principle used by Rymkiewicz was telling: "Sunday Morning" overshadowed the whole book (and proved to be Rymkiewicz's best translation); and there were other poems dealing with religion and classical themes or allusions. In addition, Rymkiewicz selected a few poems that might be said to represent Stevens' *ars poetica* ("Of Modern Poetry," "The Man with the Blue Guitar," "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction") as well as, finally, a number of small, and conspicuously casual, poems. In his introduction, he situated Stevens in the tradition of George Santayana and Neo-Platonism: "It seems that today only the poet may be a neo-Platonist. . . . Stevens was the poet-philosopher. He searched for the ultimate and highest reality, stripped of our everyday and commonplace ideas" (5; my translation). Rymkiewicz also touched upon the imagination as the primary force at work in Stevens' poetry, and, erroneously, depicted it as the Necessary Angel who is absent (6). On the whole, his short introduc-

tion made a rather perfunctory impression and added to the general sense of obscurity of Stevens' poetry.

If we look back at Rymkiewicz's translations today, it remains hard to evaluate their overall quality, all the more so since the selection is altogether small. On the one hand, Rymkiewicz himself is a distinguished poet, and his translations are written in beautiful and perfectly lyrical Polish. Some passages—especially in those poems that resemble some of Rymkiewicz's own poetic idiom, like "Sunday Morning"—read like excellent Polish poetry, leaving a strong and unforgettable impression upon the readers. On the other hand, Rymkiewicz's preoccupation with Polish classical poetry leaves a no less obvious trace upon his translations. The Stevens put forward by the Polish poet comes across as a bit too overblown, full of high diction, alien to parody and self-parody, more out to instruct than to give pleasure or enjoy himself. Rymkiewicz's mastery of the Polish language enhances this impression, since it tends to strip Stevens of almost everything that is ambiguous, undecidable, or self-questioning. Finally, we should note that Rymkiewicz clearly failed to grasp the full meaning of some of the more difficult passages, which may be irritating when comparing the translations to the original poems.

However this may be, Rymkiewicz's book of translations was primordial in establishing and shaping Stevens' reputation in Poland for the next twenty years. During this period the poet's reputation was no longer all that bad. To a certain extent, it would appear that Rymkiewicz even managed to arouse the interest of some Polish readers and critics. But by and large such an interest was still limited to the poems translated by Rymkiewicz, and to Stevens' links with Eliot, Pound, and Williams. In the ensuing decade, the seventies, a few of Stevens' poems appeared in a small anthology of American poetry (edited by Teresa Truszkowska). And there were some other translations. But in general Stevens continued to be viewed as one of many minor modernist poets who nourished the poetic soil from which Eliot and Pound sprung up.

#### IV

This situation started to change again in the second half of the 1980s. In 1986, *Literatura na Świecie*—the most important Polish journal to deal with non-Polish literature—published an extensive portfolio of materials on the New York School of Poetry. The issue included translations of poems by Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and James Schuyler, critical essays, general information, and a long interview with Ashbery. The collection proved decisive in the development of Polish poetry in the 1990s. Critics coined the term *O'Harism*, separate and influential books of translations appeared (O'Hara in 1988, Ashbery in 1992), and one of Poland's youngest poets put forward Ashbery's books as the Bible of his generation.

As a spin-off, the New York School issue of *Literatura na Świecie* brought about a renewed interest in Wallace Stevens. Although the magazine did not contain any of his poems, Stevens' presence could be felt. O'Hara and Ashbery for instance mentioned him; Ashbery told Piotr Sommer (the editor of the magazine) that Stevens was one of his favorite poets; and critical essays by Marjorie Perloff and David Shapiro included allusions to Stevens and quoted passages from his poems. Furthermore, Ashbery's own poems, many of which were modeled upon Stevens, began to make it easier for Polish readers and critics to understand and accept Stevens' difficult and experimental poetry. It is something of a chronological anomaly, then, that in Poland it was John Ashbery who paved the way for Wallace Stevens, notably the Stevens of experiments, word-play, and pastiche. Strange as it may sound, Ashbery, and partly also O'Hara, demonstrated the potential hidden in the poetry of their Hartford predecessor.

At more or less the same time, the rapidly changing political situation (*perestroika* in the late 1980s, the gradual liberalization of the market, the collapse of the communist system, the first free election of 1989, the inevitable transition to a capitalist economy) contributed to a much greater distribution and, consequently, popularity of Western culture. Not that we should speak of a veritable revival, since Polish culture has always been a part of the Occident, but at least now the reception of Western culture was made easier. From the late 1980s onwards, it was no longer the state's publishing offices nor the state authorities who decided which works of art could be published and which could not. All of a sudden it turned out there were many unfulfilled duties as far as the reception of Western art was concerned. We witnessed the first translations of books by authors like Vladimir Nabokov and George Orwell. Private publishers produced more and more books by Western novelists, poets, and other writers. The literature coming from the United States and Western Europe became fashionable again and sold in substantial numbers. This in turn made it possible to publish and widely distribute books and anthologies that contained more difficult, sophisticated, or even experimental kinds of literature.

The change of climate affected the reception of twentieth-century poetry as well. The nineties proved to be a time of poetry anthologies. As far as American poetry was concerned, three anthologies were published. Each of them included texts by Stevens, even if his presence was not always palpable. In 1992, first, Julia Hartwig and Artur Międzyrzecki published a 450-page long collection of American poetry, with poets ranging from Edgar Allan Poe to Charles Simic. The translators decided to include thirteen poems by Stevens, most of them taken from Rymkiewicz's collection. The anthology also added notes on the poets—the one on Stevens reading: "His intellectual and difficult poetry involved a constant effort at redefining language and the essence of poetry" (379; my translation). In the general preface, however, Stevens was given little space and was described merely as a contemporary of Eliot, Pound, and Williams. It would seem

that both Hartwig and Międzyrzecki shared Miłosz's sceptical opinion of Stevens.

In 1994, Grzegorz Musiał published an anthology of American poetry since 1940. Here only four short poems by Stevens were included. In a short note following the poems, Musiał emphasized Stevens' impact upon the poetry of Ashbery and Donald Justice, and he went on to stress the poet's irony as a device for questioning and undermining the stability of the world. Again, strikingly, Musiał situated Stevens' poetry alongside that of John Ashbery as well as other modern, or even postmodern, poets. Unfortunately, the translations themselves were not free of mistakes.

Finally, in 1998 we saw the publication of Stanisław Barańczak's anthology of American poetry, *From Walt Whitman to Bob Dylan* (as the translator proudly states). In this volume, Stevens is represented by six poems, one of them a new translation of "Sunday Morning." Barańczak opposed Stevens to Whitman and Frost and depicted him as a "great innovator in poetry . . . an elitist poet . . . who represented the avant-garde direction of the revival of the imagination and of poetic language" (80; my translation). It should be noted that all of these anthologists also stress the fact that Stevens' poetry was strongly influenced by, and linked to, its European counterparts (Larbaud, Valéry, and so forth).

The three anthologies from the 1990s presented Stevens as an innovator and, at the same time, a respected classic. Overall, the editors preferred the already canonical poems suggested by American anthologies and collections ("Sunday Morning," "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," and "Of Modern Poetry" being clear favorites). The commentaries added to the translations mentioned Stevens in the context of Eliot, Pound, and Williams, who were described as the major modernists, with Stevens and Moore being represented as minor ones. The notes were not supposed to be analyses. As a matter of fact, they did not go beyond Rymkiewicz in describing Stevens' poetry in terms of the Supreme Fiction, the imagination, and, somewhat vaguely rendered, the spirit of the avant-garde. Yet both translations and commentaries renewed the interest and coincided with a growing popularity of the New York School among young poets and critics.

Stevens' presence was also increasingly felt in literary magazines. Although there have been no special issues devoted exclusively to Stevens, some of the most popular and respected magazines in Poland have begun to publish a number of translations. In *Akcent* and *Kresy* for example (both published in Lublin), there were translations by Kuba Koziół, who is also known for his translations of Pound. In *NaGłos* (published in Cracow) Stevens' poems appeared twice, this time translated by Adam Szostkiewicz and Magda Heydel. It is very difficult to give a fair assessment of the Stevens presented in these magazines. The selection of poems is frequently limited and seemingly arbitrary, the translations are not preceded or followed by any commentaries, and they are not placed in any context that might help readers to understand Stevens' poetry.

Together with the above-mentioned anthologies, the magazines have brought about a strange situation. Whereas we have been witnessing a slow and gradual appreciation of Stevens' poetry (and only his poetry: we do not yet have Polish translations of the essays and letters, nor of critical evaluations of Stevens' poetry), this appreciation is still haunted by a widespread ignorance about many aspects of the poetry. It seems that Polish readers are not ready yet to accept some of the more original and bold interpretations by, say, Harold Bloom or Frank Lentricchia. The Polish Stevens is still a poet of a handful of poems which add up to the picture of a classical and slightly weird, oddball poet. Fortunately, the published presence of such poets as O'Hara and Ashbery has now equipped readers with the sensitivity necessary for reading some of Stevens' most difficult poems.

## V

In what ways will Wallace Stevens and his poetry be perceived and responded to in the next few years? This is of course the kind of question no one dares answer with any decisiveness. Yet there is some evidence to suggest that in Poland Stevens will be more and more an important figure among poets, critics, and translators. One of the most intriguing dimensions of Stevens' presence is his influence upon the youngest generation of poets. To be sure, the Hartford poet is not for the moment as influential as Ashbery or Pound, yet there is a growing awareness of the infinite possibilities hidden in Stevens' poems and, consequently, a curiosity bordering on fascination. Mostly, however, the influence of Stevens manifests itself indirectly, either through other poets' eyes or in the form of imitation. Indeed, one of the most characteristic forms of the reception of twentieth-century American poetry in Poland has been precisely that of imitation instead of translation. Zbigniew Machej (b. 1958) has changed Robert Creeley's poems so as to make them look like poems originally written by a Polish poet. Darek Foks (b. 1966) has translated O'Hara in such a way that all local particularities are made Polish. Andrzej Sosnowski (b. 1959) is the author of a rendering of O'Hara's "In Memory of My Feelings"; the title of his poem is "Cover"—the term referring to pop music—and O'Hara's text is employed to comment upon Sosnowski's own experiences. The general structure and the plot of the poem are preserved, but some details and metaphors are changed so as to give the impression of something familiar and common.

Wallace Stevens, too, has had his Polish imitators. One of the best examples perhaps is Tadeusz Pióro (b. 1960), who is both a poet and a translator. His "Teksas jako prawda" ("Texas as Truth") starts with the words: "It is snowing. I'm dreaming of Stevens." The poem is not a strict imitation but it does preserve something of the atmosphere of Stevens' work. In the second part, Pióro refers directly to the American poet:

It may be abstract, must be  
Elastic, compact and governed  
By remote control, independent of the whims

Of weather, subject to every influence  
And complex as the grave. (my translation)

Even more interesting is Pióro's long poem entitled "Zwyczajny wieczór na Mokotowie" ("An Ordinary Evening in Mokotow" [Mokotow is a district in Warsaw]). The subtitle reads "Fragments of an Imitation" and indeed, the poem is a series of bizarre variations upon the first few cantos of Stevens' poem set in New Haven. Here are three of the fragments illustrating the way Pióro treats the original poem:

This heap of stones is an homage  
To the heroes of midnight, to them  
We make orisons

For the beauty of Mon Cotou,  
Palaces, gardens, springs  
Of love and of the desire to love  
.....

The real has always been

The beginning not the end, naked Alpha  
Not the hierophant Omega, of dense  
Investiture, with luminous vassals, flags.

In the anonymous keys of the universe  
A breath sounds as the labile element  
That wants to be tamed just by

Us, discoverers of the home and origins  
Of language, in New Haven or Mokotow . . .  
.....

Like Mokotow seen through the certain eye,  
The eye made clear of uncertainty, with the sight  
Of simple seeing, without reflection.

We seek nothing beyond reality.  
Within it, everything, the spirit's  
Alchemy included, the spirit that

Goes roundabout and through,  
Not merely the visible and solid world  
But glimpses, movable feasts

In the sky's central or the earth's depot  
Or lunar branches of the mind  
To trumpet what majesty it may find. (my translation)

Comparing Pióro's poem to Stevens' "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" is an entertaining and interesting experience but, obviously, the purpose of the imitation is not only or simply to offer entertainment. Pióro's poem is a voice in a long and heated discussion on the possibility of translating Stevens into Polish. In fact, it may be argued that poems like "The Comedian as the Letter C" or "An Ordinary Evening" cannot really be transposed faithfully into Polish. Pióro seems to believe that it is possible and necessary, by contrast, to imitate Stevens in such a way as to add new and original images, expressions, and ideas that would contribute to the success of the overall poem. What counts is above all the final impression, even at the cost of numerous departures from the original, and not so much any word-for-word accuracy. Besides—and this is a big "besides"—Stevens himself made his poetry quasi-imitative, inserting as he did numerous allusions and references to, say, Milton, Wordsworth, or Keats (as Eleanor Cook among others has shown us in her wonderful *Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War in Wallace Stevens*). This allusive strategy cannot be rendered in Polish, and the effects achieved by Stevens may be paralleled only by local effects—allusions and quotations referring readers to the texts *they* know, to local particularities, even pointing to the very process of translation—just as Stevens' poems are ironic translations of other poems. Pióro's poem may be seen as an interesting contribution to this on-going discussion.

Finally, I should mention the Stevens issue of *Literatura na Świecie* which was published at the end of 2000. Undoubtedly, this is the biggest presentation of Stevens in Poland so far. The issue contains many new translations, from *Harmonium* to the posthumously published poems. The poems are followed, moreover, by Polish translations of two essays, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" and "Imagination as Value." To top it all, some critical voices and biographical information have been added as well. Altogether, Polish readers now have nearly 200 pages of Stevensiana. The editors' self-declared interest in putting together this issue has been in the metaphysical dimension of Stevens' poetry, meaning that early and imagist poems are avoided, and the poet is presented as one of the most important writers who helped pass from the hard modernism of Eliot to the ambiguous, complex, and at the same time self-questioning poetry of the postmodern era. In line with this approach, the issue also includes translations of poems by Elizabeth Bishop, A. R. Ammons, James Tate, and

Charles Reznikoff, as well as translations of two essays by Marjorie Perloff ("Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?" and "'Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?' Revisited"), thereby establishing a context well-suited to Stevens' poetry and containing the promise of enhancing this poet's reputation still further.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>It is worth remembering that in post-war Poland Neo-Classicism was not only an aesthetic but also a political position. It was that position which defined itself above all negatively, as the opposite of the binding directives of Socialist Realism.

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# The Sound of Wallace Stevens in France

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*A little patience, and the Mona Lisa will smile eternally.*  
—Anonymous

## INTRODUCTION

THAT WALLACE STEVENS made use of French words is well known and has been frequently commented upon. The fact that he never set foot in France, on the other hand, will always remain enigmatic. One may suppose that the distance he thus maintained was a way of assuring the functioning of fiction on all levels of creation. His France is indeed a fictive one. But his preoccupation with French poetry is nothing strange: it was almost inevitable. The avant-garde at the time, in America as well as England, was in great part absorbed by French culture. Moreover, the need for the exotic and refreshing power of foreign words, or of words whose depth is not yet diminished by current usage, is common to most writers. It is closely related to the construction of fiction and, in the case of poets, to the initial experience of *pure* words that underlies the extensive search to renew language.

Poetry itself is a kind of foreign language, a language freshly built within the language. In spite of his famous assertion "French and English constitute a single language" (*OP* 202), Stevens was probably quite conscious of the essential differences underlying the French and English languages. His provocative point of view served his artistic aims. Linguistic differences are like perceptive differences of the same reality. But phonetic, syntactic, and grammatical differences, taken as material factors, carry an essential weight in the making of literature. Ideas are born at the same time as their verbal expressions and there is no doubt that the linguistic factor plays an important role in this process. That is why poetry always comes from inside the language, not from outside. The variances of vision and approach that the French and English languages tend to induce in the user's mind-set are in themselves intriguing. Inasmuch as Stevens' ideas reflected and still reflect a certain number of key values in American culture, one could, for instance, undertake a comparison between "l'Esprit français" and the "American imagination."

Yet the nature of poetry is precisely to exceed language. When languages are crystallized in their highest form, or “supreme” expression, and have thus become in a way “foreign” to their own linguistic contexts, we are dealing with such an idea, or excessive idea, of language. No poet is comparable to Stevens, because every poet has his or her own way of extending the meanings of ordinary language. The problem turns out to be less a matter of delimiting the ultimate idea operating in the literary field of each culture than it is a matter of defining the contradictory ways in which different cultures view the very concept of poetry.

In my previous critical approach to Stevens’ writing, the first step toward comparing the poetic exploration of major concepts consisted of a full commentary (through the analysis of one of his major poems, “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction”) that would enable readers to view his work from France and eventually to make implicit comparisons explicit. For the sole benefit of French readers, I devoted much space to the presentation of key American exegeses concerning the poet’s achievements.<sup>1</sup> The present paper, however, requires a reversal of this viewpoint, and one that is presumably still destined to grow. Its main concern is to convey some of the specific reflections and the logical offshoots that came about at the close of my earlier analysis.

#### RECEPTION AND TRANSLATIONS

Although toward the end of his life Wallace Stevens corresponded with French intellectuals such as Jean Wahl and Jean Paulhan, his name in France is familiar to only a small number of artists and connoisseurs of American poetry. In 1975, thanks to the publication of seven of his poems in the authoritative Parisian poetry review *Argile*, many of my generation became acquainted with his writings for the first time.<sup>2</sup> The contrasting combination of a linear simplicity and high ideals, the shifty transformation of abstractions into allegories, found no equivalent in any of our native poets and seemed as much due to the author’s talent as to the genius of the language itself.<sup>3</sup> Bernard Noël’s highly intellectual transposition did not help to clarify which was which. Nor did many of the translations that came to light in the succeeding years, like the ones proposed by Nancy Blake or Anne Luyat-Moore, praiseworthy as they were. The fortunate exceptions were Olivier Amiel’s unnoticed rendering of “The Man with the Blue Guitar” and a recent translation of the prose from *The Necessary Angel* by Claude Mouchard and Sonia Bechka-Zouechtiagh, which has no doubt helped the French reader to situate the poet in his mental surroundings.<sup>4</sup>

A disparate selection of poems has appeared then, haphazardly in various reviews, in collections of American poetry, and in volumes issued by small publishing houses. In spite of their increase since the end of the 1980s and although his name has gradually become an American reference point for contemporary French poets and students of literature, one cannot say that a real effort at systematic translation has yet begun. Though

quoted more often than before, Stevens is still widely unknown and rarely commented upon. The reception of his poetry has been, on the whole, mainly restricted to university departments. In short, there has never really been public acknowledgment of his work in France. The reasons for this are obviously complex. They naturally have mixed origins and simultaneously relate to distinct sets of problems.

One of the few to have undertaken an extensive study of Stevens' work in relation to French poetry (Laforgue, Valéry, Mallarmé, Apollinaire, St. John Perse) was Michel Benamou. He was also the first academic in France to write a doctoral thesis on Stevens: *L'Œuvre-Monde de Wallace Stevens*.<sup>5</sup> Largely inspired by the figurative structuralism of Gilbert Durand's cultural anthropology, this book offered a remarkable survey of the poet's different "œuvres." Its critical outline, organized chronologically, remains a reference in French universities to date.

The crossing of language boundaries and the technical difficulties pertaining to the original poems (which do constitute real stumbling blocks) are indicative of the tricky problem of bridging cultural and mental mind-sets. Although this problem generally holds for all important translations of poetry, it is particularly acute in the case of Stevens. Translating his English into cognate French just does not work. Not only are the significations different in the two cultures, but also the act of transposing and understanding him in French instantly brings out the contrasts between French and American poetic traditions. The rendering of his diction is as significant and takes up as much energy, if not more, than the ultimate rendering of his meaning. In fact, the one is often the tactical key to the other. His meaning is nearly always *anamorphous*: it lies in, and is projected from, what he does *not* say, a trait he shares with Baudelaire. His "music" leads to his thought and vice versa. Thus, one is constantly facing problems of tonality and scanning the target language for equivalent resonances. But the resonance of diction is usually the resonance, or the rhetoric, of the subject matter's hidden implications, and again, of its running thought process. One is actually comparing thought with thought, comparing the cultural status of one thought with that of the thought into which it is aesthetically transposed.

The act of transposing, therefore, depends principally on solving cultural differences inherent in the respective discourses, an exercise that naturally implies a knowledge of both languages from the inside, but which assumes also a conviction of what poetry is and is not. Although one can expect the core of Stevens' purpose in his aesthetic and poetic quest to escape the Cartesian way of thinking at first, one has to bear in mind that it equally manages to escape the pragmatic mind to some extent. Stevens has been perceived as an impenitent "tongue twister" by his American readers, too. Reading him in French, then, should rightly produce a similar effect. Still, because the questions he asks are so strongly congenial to the belief that underlies poetry in general, it is the final relevance of these

questions that makes it possible to read him in French as well. This final relevance, belonging to all high poetry, may be said to act as one of the possible fulfillments of our world.

Paradoxically too, it should be remembered that the old speculative tendency of French rationalism connects very well with Stevens' ability to annul the premises of his own assertions, and, furthermore, that the contemporary perspectives of poststructuralism and deconstruction introduced in Stevens' own country by Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, and Kristeva have since been adapted to explain his use of language in stimulating ways. Though French theory and criticism were belated in their development compared to those of other countries, their instant success with "structuralism" served undoubtedly as a means of integrating foreign works in their field of exploration. The advantage of recent advances within the critical and theoretical approach to literature in France is that it places all objects into a genuine intellectual perspective. With regard to Wallace Stevens, this intellectual outlook would appear to be especially effective today and may correct the initial dissymmetry of his poetry's reception.

#### A CRITICAL APPROACH

Schematically speaking, one could say that at the start of the twentieth century the American crisis of the representation of reality in poetry questions the actual concept or fiction of God (whose romantic name according to Coleridge is the imagination), while the French crisis of the representation of reality in poetry questions or deconstructs the concept of literature itself (which according to Mallarmé is language). Prior in time, the epic of experience as described by Emerson in America became synonymous with the creative imagination that stood to enlighten the people, while in France the radiant light of reason remained an equivalent of the powerful mind (*l'Esprit*) that could renew itself through the negation of its own image in speech. On both sides of the Atlantic, postmodern poetry has since then largely outdated the theoretical distinctions between empiricism and Cartesianism. New referees and conceptual tools are being sought. Stevens himself raised the question of the changes that have occurred in Occidental culture since Plato as capital for understanding the origin of verbal images (in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words"), implying, too, that the gaps between the words of Socrates and the words of Christ, and later, between religiousness and agnosticism (that is, the ontological crossing from irony to drama and from divinity to nothingness), significantly affect our outlook on reality.

Since the end of the Second World War these verbal images of the world and of humankind in general have undergone further radical changes. Moreover, exchanges between France and America have developed in such a manner that it is impossible to maintain an impartial and objective view of their differences of perspectives. The task remains huge, even when reduced to confronting Stevens' conception of poetry with that of modern

French poetry during the first half of the twentieth century—taking the term “modern” in both of its senses, as the avant-garde *and* conformism, that is, taking into consideration that all original views have their academic replicas. Still, the comparison of concepts such as “mind” and “imagination,” as used throughout the poetry of both cultures, proves to be more interesting for studying Stevens than that of comparing him to any specific French poet corresponding to his generation. The various questions raised by a thought-to-thought comparison of two cultures, far from being exhausted, are very much alive.

According to Jean Bessière, the massive American commentary on Stevens divides into two significant and predominant lines of interpretation. The first and most frequent of these locates his work in a specifically American context, one that relates to the prevailing observance of the writer’s self. In other words, faithful to the national tradition within which Stevens’ work is inscribed, it acknowledges in his poetic gesture the heroic adventure of a self endeavoring to acquire a language and a destiny. This main line of “misreading” is particularly well illustrated by Harold Bloom and his theory of conflicting heritage. The second line of interpretation reads the same work in a strictly thematic continuity with Mallarmé. It favors a European filiation and refers to the prevailing observance of the negative polarity that identifies poetry with decreation, poetry with symbolic artifice. This line is mainly represented by Michel Benamou and his research on the practical or impractical connections between Stevens and French poets (see Serio under “Symbolism” and “French symbolism”). Both of these types of interpretation, however, suppose that the question read by Wallace Stevens in Mallarmé—the question of the situation that poetry and the poem uphold in themselves and by themselves—has not been fully recognized. From Mallarmé to Stevens there is, in this view, a continuity that objects to the duality of critical interpretations and that ties itself to the question that the poet himself retains: in what way can poetry be itself *and* the world when the Mallarméan identification of the poetic with the fictional is maintained?

Such a question excludes the adoption of symbolism on Stevens’ part as a compelling hypothesis and also excludes the identification of poetry with the visible world. These two refutations may explain, first, why it is only the word that should be identified with the creation of his world and, second, why he showed so little interest in Ezra Pound’s imagism. The Mallarméan affirmation of poetry’s strict autonomy then becomes inseparable from the poet’s function and from the explicit recognition of fiction as fiction. By maintaining there is no interrogation about poetry that is not an interrogation about its fiction, Stevens reverts to the basic principles according to which poetry claims itself to be essentially “situational” (Bessière 88), thus enabling the poet to achieve an image of his *own* situation in reality.

Poetry knows *itself* as fiction; the poet confirms this by constantly pointing out that the voice of poetry indeed constitutes a fiction, a rhetorician's fiction. "[T]he poet is that 'artifex' who makes the fiction of a world out of his voice" (Bessière 85; my translation); he is "the single artificer of the world" in which he sings (*CP* 129). That such a fiction should choose the "idea of order" as its theme does not therefore assimilate the fiction into any order. It only means that human words do not belong to the realm of nature and that to evoke nature according to human metaphors is pure vanity. The paradox is that the fiction claims its independence from reality even though it speaks the words of reality. This implies too that "the visibility of poetry and its fiction and the thought of literature mingle with the visibility of the thought and the imagination that make this fiction" (Bessière 83; my translation). One recognizes here the form of paradox on which the argument of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" is built: poetry's fiction is common *and* uncommon. Between poetry and the subject of the poem "there is / An absence in reality, / Things as they are. Or so we say. / But are these separate?" (*CP* 176–77).

The kind of imaginative comprehension into which the poem as depiction of the world sheds or transforms itself is, in the end, nothing but the question put forward by that very transformation. For Stevens, as opposed to Mallarmé, this does not bear any particular prospect of hope. Among poets, he is perhaps the one who has inhabited most intensely the weaknesses of poetry and contributed at the same time to the reaffirmation of its generating powers. By bringing further to light the paradoxical bond that exists between writing as fiction and the consciousness of an object brought into presence by that same writing, he incidentally answers the problem of knowing why a specific work originates to become a model and to command an aesthetic field.

#### IMAGINATION AND FICTION

If we now return to what may be called the national configuration of ideas, we should note how in France a subtle but distinct epistemological difference in the concept and use of the word "imagination" may be said to prevail. Although Montaigne's *Essays* at the time of the Renaissance could still be considered as "un recueil des *imaginings* de Montaigne" ("a collection of the 'imaginings' of Montaigne"), works of art in the modern sense can no longer be called "*œuvres d'imagination*" ("works of the imagination"). Similarly, the tacit Anglo-American analogy or adequacy between imagination and poetry is not something natural to French culture. The idea of this word, which is entirely devoted to the imagined object itself and not to any imaginative action or ability, would bear today a restricted or derogatory sense. Between the French "imagination" and "imaginaire" there lies nonetheless approximately the same difference as between the English use of "imagination" and "imaginary." The first points to an operation of the mind distinct from sensorial perception and cere-

bral abstraction, while the second suggests an artifice closely pertaining to the “categories of fake and feint” (as Blaise Pascal called them). But in the land of Descartes the philosophical status of the word “imagination” itself, continuously torn between sensation and intellect, never acquired a proper place. Due perhaps to the lack of an empirical or experimental background in French philosophy, it has generally been shunned as a suspicious agent bearing a distinct ontological flaw. In this sense one can say that the word has fully endured the Platonic prohibition against art as a *mimesis* belonging to the categories of falsehood and illusion. Its meaning has never reached the same symbolical climax as it did for Coleridge and the English romantics. Nor did it find a proper function or working position until the coming of psychoanalysis and the conception of the mind as partly dependent upon (or rooted in) the unconscious. Its understanding has been and still is exclusively linked to the organic production of images in the mind and to the broader field of images as such (as in the case of Sartre). Its discussion still chiefly addresses the purpose of these images more than their phenomenological origin, that is, the actual human capacity to make virtually present something that is really absent.

With respect to its power as a concept and as a symbol standing for the unity of poetry, the closest term one can find in modern French poetry would be what Yves Bonnefoy has identified as “présence” (248, 251). But there is ultimately no equivalent. The kind of “esprit” that under Baudelaire’s auspices was previously used in straight keeping with theology—although present in Stevens’ “Esthétique du Mal” and in his dialectics about Satan—has today no correspondent either. There is no doubt a moral counterpart to Stevens’ imagination: its “metaphysical t” (CP 390) is counterbalanced by “pain on the very point of pain” (CP 314). On the other hand, his “act of the mind” has more to do with aesthetics than with ethics, that is, with a modern poetic of creation. So that what stands (or stood) for the imagination in America can roughly stand for the mind in France only when given its Latin etymology of “divine breath” and “life principle.”

Stevens teaches us that the *concept* of poetry is intimately linked to the *fiction* of poetry, that is, that to create a concept in the literary field is next to creating a fiction and vice versa. But, of course, everything in art is a matter of form, which in its essence is abstract and fluctuating. If there is no French equivalent for the American concept of imagination, it is because the manifestation of the imagination in the end is *form*; or because the action of the imagination is to make the world intelligible, precisely, *through* form. The poetical form in particular is nothing but the imagination’s operating mode and its action on reality. The question of the missing equivalent would then amount to asking what is Anglo-American (or French) in the American (or French) form; it would thus be biting its own tail. But this would not be the case if the question were asking what their respective *canons* are.

"[W]ords of the world are the life of the world" (CP 474), says Stevens. A modern kind of virtue invests the form of his poetry: as an outcome of the imagination it aspires not to the accomplishment of art in the world, but to the accomplishment of the world in art. The terms of the Mallarméan explanation of poetry considered as an Orphic activity are reversed. Only reality can explain and motivate the nature of the literary quest. Artistic creation may be considered as a sort of alchemy, or as the search for a totaling sense, only if it allows the world to accomplish itself *through* it. In fact, it is by creating a world of its own that the work of art helps the earth to be earth in the minds of men: "Poetry is the saying of the unconcealedness of what is" (Heidegger 74). In this definition, as in his ontological approach to Hölderlin, Martin Heidegger stands very close to the solipsistic root in Stevens, a poet of the Threshold too, of the Interval of Time, a giant of time in a time of lack or following the absence of God. Paradoxically, the more Stevens' poetical act assumes itself purely, the more it becomes political in the etymological sense of the word (that of affairs of the city). His campaign for the realization of a particular kind of consciousness, to be reached together and individually through the poem, throws into relief his project of creating a poetry chair at Princeton University and the motives of his companionship with the multimillionaire Henri Church. At heart, the artistic form he defended actually contains a utopian dimension that, though fundamentally American (particularly through its staging of heroes), goes far beyond his country's institutional structures. By reminding us of the identification of poetry with fiction, he defines the double operating mode of the poetical artifact: first, in itself, in the world that it pictures; second, in relation to *what it is not*.

The fiction projected by the poem suggests that the daily language of human beings and of their actions is just as arbitrary as the poem itself. They share a common movement because both live in a world of manifest "analogies" (as expressed at the close of "Effects of Analogy," NA 129). The only difference is that the poem knows itself as arbitrary, possesses the knowledge of its own fiction, is keenly familiar with the world, but also acutely aware of its own limits. While it does not exclude the voices of the world, it distinguishes itself from them by specifying that they are not what the fiction is made of. Fiction is made out of words and, to paraphrase the title of one of his poems, "Men [Too Are] Made out of Words." Confronting humans with their own language, then, amounts to driving out all anthropomorphism, all explicit symbolic play. It amounts to exhibiting the strange nature of the gap or *aporia* that lies between the two. Rather than fully ontological, Stevens' minimal approach to the poetical act is indeed epistemological, but of an aporetic sort, a sort that dissolves as it appears, freezing or fastening itself in that very movement, like the angel's downward leap in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" (CP 404–05).

The imagination, then, is uncontrollable and as such is presumably guilty of forcing Stevens to use arguments in its defense, which from an

epistemological point of view is paradoxical. Every epistemology leans on its rival in order to exist. Stevens stumbles against the concept and, therefore, all analysis of Stevens stumbles with him on the definition of imagination. True, in his work the imagination overthrows reason to the point of contesting it and praising the irrational (“A Collect of Philosophy” ends with the supremacy of the imagination “or, say, intuition” [OP 279] over philosophy). The unstable, uncertain, and uncontrolled semantic elements in *Harmonium* are also devised as a form of challenge to philosophy. The play on the imperfection of our imperfect paradise in “Sunday Morning” evokes a state of incompleteness as well as an action without end. “It is not possible to attach a single, rational meaning to such things [that have their origin in the imagination] without destroying the imaginative or emotional ambiguity or uncertainty that is inherent in them” (OP 249). Yet the need to justify the foundations of an aesthetic signifies an awareness of its weaknesses, since one seeks to incorporate demonstrative arguments into what should impose itself on its own. In his remarkable monograph on Stevens, Alain Suberchicot has perfectly understood how the acute awareness of this type of contradiction is inherent in Stevens’ thinking, how it is responsible for its deliberate tautology and, at the same time, representative of his claimed independence in the face of all literary rules and aesthetic values.

The time when poetry’s supremacy was self-evident is long past. In Stevens’ days it became urgent for poetry to protect itself. That is why “the figures of instability,” in Suberchicot’s phrase, so typical of his poetry are above all attached to a question of *genus*: “it is because we experience the feeling of the frailty of sense through the installation of factors of semantic doubt in the poetical text that a writer dominates a literary genre, in this case poetry” (Suberchicot 195; my translation). Likewise, it is because sense ultimately cannot be reduced that poetry can still command the aesthetic field. That is what makes Stevens’ poetry a poetry for poets. This strength, of course, has its downside: the defense of poetry’s integrity is a necessary evil for the poet and, therefore, a potential of action carrying a definite mark of weakness. Consequently, just as the implementation of abstraction is always accompanied by the deception of not adhering to the sensitive world, the defense of the imagination is always playing with a distinct sense of failure. As Suberchicot describes it, “defeat in poetical modernism is a form of elegance that belongs to the will to guard oneself against the basically immodest and triumphant consciousness peculiar to the victorious self—a victorious self that is hardly credible because it denies so much its vulnerability” (154; my translation).

#### THE ORDER OF LANGUAGE

Contrary to the conservatism responsible for the dense mesh of shared references over generations of writers in the history of Anglo-American literary traditions, the history of French literature seems to evolve by mak-

ing repeated clean sweeps of preceding generations so as to clear the space for new ones—each in turn claiming a link with past and forgotten ancestors. Its rational tradition is not subject to the same constraints, not informed by the same necessities. Above all, French literature undergoes the order of an ideal contained in the language itself, in the institution of its “correct usage” designated by the members of the *Académie française* to operate the connection between arts, sciences and politics, literature and citizenship.<sup>6</sup> This is a singularity of the French tradition demonstrated and upheld in an innovating fashion by the late poet Francis Ponge in his worthy defense of Malherbe. The autonomy of the language that he praises and wishes to restore comprises a literary and civic ambition. It requires that a sentence should have a meaning for each of the senses that each of the terms calls for, and that it should give every reader the possibility to create his own rhetoric of resistance. Ponge’s reinstatement of the link between the poetic and the political, as well as his moral philosophy applied to poetry, have something in common with the project of Wallace Stevens: the attitude toward language commands the figure of the poet and his role in the city.

The fundamental qualities of clarity, rigor, and economy praised in the French language thus derive from a linguistic ideal whose ideological goal was to promote culture in its universal aspirations. That this language also tends to be centered on itself and to standardize ideas into fixed expressions, or experiences into definite categories of thought, explains in retrospect the intensity of the revolt that occurred against the cultural establishment through poetry during the surrealist period. That Rimbaud’s poems were to overwhelm the syntactic order of the language for a lasting time is not unrelated to the fact that he was awarded the first prize in Latin versification at the age of seven. The attitude toward poetry in France over the last two centuries has proved to be a dubious and ambivalent one. It has involved a simultaneous incensing and rejection, one of the reasons for which is certainly the desire to maintain the language into fixed forms. On the other hand, in contrast with modern French verse, where the text is seen from the start as a pure fiction and play on fiction (pioneered by such writers as Lautréamont and Mallarmé), the suppression of the narrative desire in favor of pure verbal abstraction is a more recent phenomenon in American poetry. The thinning out, if not downright abandonment, of all dramatic schemes that are used as a conventional drive in the representation of the romantic imagination, together with the systematic reappropriation of the ordinary as practiced by Wallace Stevens, certainly make him an outstanding initiator.

Generally speaking, the French start off from a thought, a theory, a whole, whose ramifications they follow in order to verify if they can accede to specifics and details, while Anglo-Saxons follow the opposite path: their starting point is observation and the “minute particulars” are recorded with the hope that their accumulation will make the world come

to light. Yves Bonnefoy, in a fascinating essay entitled "La poésie française et le principe d'identité" ("French Poetry and the Principle of Identity"), has analyzed this cultural heritage precisely with respect to the general relationship of poetry and languages. The experience of poetry as a "restored unity" of the world, he says, is in direct continuity with the experience of language. Since language is a structure, it can become the "cipher" of that unity *before* starting its process of fragmentation into formulas and concepts. What the poetical consciousness hopes to find in certain words, then, is a "real presence." In that sense, language seems to promise, beyond its conceptual moment, the same unity as that which life proposes beyond the aspects that have fragmented its presence. The richness of the language in words that express *aspects* or in the naming of *essences* (of reality) appears in the confrontation between, and the articulation of, the intention of poetry and "the language [taken] as an event." As Bonnefoy describes it, English possesses a "great aptitude for the notation of aspects, whether they belong to the human gesture or to things. . . . English poetry enters the world of relativity, of signification, of triviality (the word is untranslatable), of everyday life, in a manner which is nearly inconceivable in French within the 'highest' poetry" (257–59; my translation). For the latter type of poetry, the explanation of the world favors the analysis of essences rather than aspects of reality. This is perhaps why English and American literature have developed the device of the symbol to a degree that finds no French equivalent.

#### POETRY AND DIVINITY

The supreme fiction, by its oblique and obligatory reference to religion and to its spiritual antecedents as a formula circulating among Transcendentalist writers, constitutes a crystallization for the American imagination. It has been attached to the country's literary tradition since Walt Whitman and its meaning has generally been accepted as obvious (see Miller). The way Wallace Stevens uses the expression implies that God too can be considered an invention. God is not a reality but a fiction that has, or could have, all the power of a reality. That is why His death (together with the death of Satan) is precisely the ruin of the very capacity to believe or, as Stevens would say, "to believe beyond belief" (*OP* 280).

With this predicament placed in the title of one of his longest poems, we are confronted from the outset with an open antinomy: an image of God empty of God. This imageless metaphor of fiction appeals to the stereotypes of divinity as much as to our own powers of reinvention. What one might call the paradoxical allegory of an abstraction inscribes itself here as something perfectly reasonable. Stevens is presenting us a notion of poetry that operates on the same basis as this contradictory double bind. "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" is born out of the intercrossing formed by an aesthetic of God (fiction) and a God of aesthetics (poetry), a chiasmus postulating too the paradoxical condition of art. Hence the programmatic

intention of replacing the idea of God with a new kind of language, that is, with a new idea of poetry. To the contemporary reader this will immediately appear as attempting something impossible, a form typical of romantic poetry. But, as we know, the impression is misleading.

The notion of a supreme fiction linked to the practice of poetry sounds alien in France, where the "Supreme," conveyed as an adjective hiding a noun, has too solemn and reverential a connotation. Achieving the impossible would have more to do with the will to change life, or the world, through the subversive power of words (Rimbaud) than with the "capital idea" of God. Subsequent, extensive literary connections with the Bible are not as natural as they are in England or America. Since the understanding and application of the biblical text are still more or less apprehended as the Church's exclusive privilege in France, its deconstruction is unthinkable. The difference of mediation that exists between the two cultures with respect to its practice, which is due principally to the variance of credo between Protestantism and Catholicism, shows a marked breach concerning the essential question of interpreting the Scriptures and the possible drifts permitted between heresy and orthodoxy. It also indicates a difference of attitude concerning the value that is given to the word, to the act of reading, and finally to the printed letter in general. We know that for communities affected by the Reformation, a confrontation with the Book implied a somewhat more intimate, personal, and individual exercise.

For Stevens and the Calvinism that constitutes his background, various displays of religion are considered, from the start, as components of reality among others, a reality conceived by many critics as opposed to the demonstrations of faith. The quest for reality is complacently evoked by them as a substitute for the quest for God. A better and more subtle distinction (operating also in the work of Francis Ponge) would be the one between reality and the real, between the cadaverous and alienating flux of speech and the real that stands beyond. As Stevens puts it, "We seek / The poem of pure reality, untouched / By trope or deviation, straight to the word" (CP 471). The question is not how to think literature as an experience of faith but, rather, how to think creation as an *act* of faith. This general misapprehension offers Stevens the occasion for many an irony, one excellent instance being the falsely philosophical aphorisms of Professor Eucalyptus in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven."

Yet only a nonbeliever *and* an American poet could offer his readers a *poetical idea of God* and let himself be tempted by such an experience in relative comfort. No French poet, not even a strong believer like Claudel, could assert the act of faith of his poetry in such a blunt, detached, and ironical way. The comparison with practicing Christians is in fact beside the point. Rimbaud's *Illuminations* bears a profound knowledge of religion although he had long ceased to believe, which is what enhances its modernity. More contemporary poets like Ponge, Michaux, Char, and

Bonnefoy all seem to have banned the very possibility of the idea of God from the start (except if used in a humorous or sarcastic context), though one cannot certify whether this banishment also concerns the "soul." Despite an approximate twenty-year time gap, this generation is the one with which Stevens' work is most compatible, primarily because of its materialistic treatment of language. Moreover, the ideology of God has practically ceased to exist in France; it has been replaced as it were by the exercise of "laïcité" ("secularism").<sup>7</sup> Being a free but responsible citizen of the world is an aptitude that seems to square also with the conviction expressed by Stevens at the close of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction": "Civil, madam, I am" (CP 406).

When reading Stevens from a French point of view, one is thus reacting from within a cultural area where the separation between religion and politics, Church and State, is legally founded on the active refusal of the sovereign authority of God and of any form of civil religion. This, of course, has to be taken into consideration, since it cannot be without influence on the ways of thinking and conceiving of art in general, just as the birth of literary creativity in America cannot be dissociated from the emblems of a Puritan spirituality established by its first settlers.

#### A HUMANISTIC ESCORT

Underlying Stevens' repetitions as a determining procedure of his literariness and formalism is his idealism.<sup>8</sup> The obsession with centrality is one of its symptoms. A more precise factor of differentiation, then, when reading him in a French context, is the vast corpus, or *materia poetica*, of English poetry in which this idealism is partly rooted. Here again the religious references play an important part. The metaphysical symbolism in Milton, so important to Wordsworth and Shelley, cannot be compared with the use of biblical myths in French classicism and romanticism, but does constitute a significant feature in Stevens' heritage and one of his principal channels to European culture. The English romantic poets contribute to the creative heterogeneity of his work. He owes them a good deal of the chanting qualities that are sensible in his intellectual lyricism: a song of the intimate in the service of all. Its ethical element is a radical humanism: the role played by the citizen poet and his words as carriers of supreme fictions in the endeavor to suspend momentarily the modern lack of belief. Hence his will to create a norm that actualizes beauty and allows one to rediscover it in "the particulars of rapture" (CP 392), the alpha and omega of his work: "It Must Give Pleasure."

St. Augustine writes " 'Without need of any light, Wisdom illuminates the minds that are in need and governs the world down to the spinning leaves of trees' " (qtd. Sollers 1; my translation). Those spinning leaves form the penultimate image around which the negative theology of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" revolves (CP 406). Finally, the simple action of circulating, says the poet, is good in itself and suffices. His supreme fic-

tion is brought down to a spinning leaf and to a "gilded street" in Paris after a lecture at the Sorbonne. What is really spinning and glistening is the fictive power of the poem. The achievement of the impossible here is next to conveying something of the unrepresentable: the magnetic void of the fiction's revolving center or "crystal" (CP 407), attributed previously to the sudden voicelessness, or voiceless truth, implied by the two closing words of "The Man on the Dump": "Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the" (CP 203). The imagination, for Stevens, is expressed through "creations of sound." But one encounters nowhere the sounds he commands, except in poetry. The traditional song of the nightingale in "Autumn Refrain," for instance, sounds all the louder because it can only "mentally be 'seen'" (Rosu 179). Since what we hear is only the "image" of a sound, the paradox of that sound is double: it reverses the combined senses of sight and audition (an eye that hears, an ear that sees) and, by depicting the symbolic power of the nightingale as a fiction (all the more present through its complete absence), it exhibits the poem's own theater as an independent act. The ambivalent relations between poetry and reality, between artificial and natural ground, figurative and literal sense, are resolved by resuming the Mallarméan notion of the poetical act defined as an act of construction (cf. Valéry as quoted in OP 293). Ultimately, the mere "circulation" of words can be seen as a kind of construction. This conception connects in many ways with the pragmatic or Emersonian approach to language and reveals the most imaginative aspect of Stevens' thought. First, it reinstates in the high language of poetry all the qualities of vagueness and of play that are natural to words in ordinary language, and second, the range of its imaginative energy, running from highly articulated language to mere sound, embraces not only the verbal but also the preverbal and the oververbalized (as these terms have been defined by Margaret Dickie in "Collections of Sound in Stevens").

What is so striking is that Stevens liberates the representational quality of words as if language were analogous to a free translation in which expression was only approximately faithful; as if paronymy was not the exception but the rule, and equivocation the very law of expression. One and the same word proves capable of serving innumerable intentional meanings, but signifies too that we are, all together, infinitely rich and despairingly poor. The ivory tower of fiction is the poet's own solitude, and his brilliant reply to that inescapable condition experienced by all poets is "that speech is not dirty silence / Clarified. It is silence made still dirtier" (CP 311). Such an approach rejects the assumption that the poetical construction befits any form of dialectics; hence it excludes the possibility of expressing a power of the mind (that is, the function of language is not to clarify the disorders of life). Poetry happens *because* there is no such concordance between itself and the world: "The squirming facts exceed the squamous mind" (CP 215).

As mastered by Whitman, American verse shows a strong sense of the fragment and of the fortuitous, which makes it aspire all the more to the disclosure of the One, the fundamental unity of the world, or the romantic fusion of mind and nature. It is really suffused with the idea of unity and centrality, an idea of which Stevens' poems—as successfully destabilizing as they are—provide so many striking instances, which act as a kind of romantic counterpoint for the comfort of the reader. By contrast, French letters before Rimbaud have always lacked the sense of the fragment, feared the fortuitous, and showed a strong sense of the organic totality or harmonious composition centered on praise for the perfect autonomy and reflexivity of the language. Their sense of the fragmentation of reality, or of the definite absence of a center, has only been acquired through an experience of disaster. This has authorized, as an opposing principle, the consciousness of the fundamental dispersal and discontinuity of the universe, that is, the essential strangeness of humans on earth. It is as if, on the common road to the accomplishment of speech, the birth of the one was the funeral of the other. The general tendency would then be that while the one works from the imagination the other works against it.<sup>9</sup> Yet both perspectives have adapted to their own manner the original Hölderlinian pronouncement that human beings exist poetically. On the one hand, imagination considered as a possibility of assembling mind and matter is accompanied by an artistic will whose primary function enables the being to inhabit the world through speech; on the other hand, imagination is only a way to operate the "artifex" or artistic fiction, that is, its role cannot make up for the imperfect synthesis between reality and its poetic representation, and the ontological destiny of humankind, the capacity to inhabit the world through speech, is forever deferred, disseminated.

Since both try to piece the world together, there is no need to settle for the one or the other. Ultimately both processes are present in both cultures. This is to say that Stevens' ideas, like those of all great poets, are not exterior to language: they are *its* exterior. He sees and hears them in the cracks of the language. His ideas are constituted by the visual and audible ingress of life in the language. The sad but inevitable flattening of his original polysemic sense through its translation into French should not alter the spirit or *letter* of the text, which is its specific way of organizing the materials that compose it, that is, the essential inside-outside modalities of his speech, his exteriorized interiority and interiorized exteriority. Jean Bessière speaks of Stevens' poetry as "a manner of paralyzed omnipotence" (85; my translation) because the fiction of the poem, its power or "desire for resemblance" (NA 77), extends itself to the world by communicating a dead end. Although it preserves a phenomenological presentation of the voice, this voice is reduced to a mere figure of speech, a theatrical figure, admitting the play between the speaker of the poem and the figure

of the poet (cf. "The Idea of Order at Key West"). Like Whitman's speaker, it says *I*, but means *we*. The serious playfulness of poetry is thus restored via the lesson of its essential interrogativity, that is, via the yes-no duality that underlies and runs through language as a whole. The modernity of Stevens' poems lies, then, in their linguistic skepticism: "The invention of consciousness is simultaneous with the invention of language, which, in turn, measures both the restraint upon and the expression of human freedom" (Poirier 133). They are modern because the question is the answer itself, the meaning of the text is the problem it propounds. The sound of the written word being parallel to reality, and the fiction taking place precisely within the flexibility of language, Stevens' language communicates with its own exterior, plays with its own boundaries, is at once autocratic and allegorical in the face of its own *aporias*.

The minus sign is certainly no less productive in art than the plus sign—after all, art is choice—and modern painting for instance clearly develops at the expense of techniques that deprive us of past acquisitions. What seems ruinous is not the techniques in themselves, but the fact that they are only techniques and that so much has been sacrificed on their behalf. This is not the case with Wallace Stevens. His use of the minus sign, so to speak, is ultimately designed as a plus sign. His techniques essentially resulting from the thorough transformation of romantic commonplaces into a unique speech have, as such, never gotten in the way of truth. Their only claim is efficiency.

Due to further changes in the history of our intellectual outgrowth, negations today do not harvest in the same way they did in the 1940s or 1950s. The divestive negation once so typical of and fashionable in modernism (and its criticism) is indeed capable of endowing a positive dimension: "We shall [be] / Pleased that the irrational is rational" (*CP* 406). The positive sign of Stevens' negations is that, although they were present, planted in the text from the start, they have remained contemporaneous.

There is no airtight partition between the destiny of the arts and the discourses that are made on their behalf. In the end, however, the artistic act is irreducible to the procedures of its social, philosophic, religious, or any other kind of legitimation. "Health as literature, as writing, consists in inventing a people that are missing," writes Gilles Deleuze (14; my translation). In driving language off its beaten tracks, Wallace Stevens anticipated the language of a people yet to come. What is still to be achieved constitutes the future of his poems and their positive effects are like a signature of hope inscribed in them.

Paris  
France

<sup>1</sup>See Calliyannis. Although it opens a discussion onto the process of imagination and of repetition, the main body of this work is a canto-by-canto analysis of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction." Its principal critical supports for interpretation are those of Harold Bloom, Eleanor Cook, and Helen Vendler.

<sup>2</sup>See the list of Works Cited under Stevens. *Argile*, whose previous format and model was *Éphémère*, ceased shortly after 1975. Both were founded by Maeght Éditeur and all issues are now out of print. Bernard Noël's translations were later reprinted as part of his larger selection for Éditions Unes (1989). The initially selected poems were: "Metaphors of a Magnifico," "Gallant Château," "Man Carrying Thing," "Men Made out of Words," "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm," "Burghers of Petty Death," and "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour."

<sup>3</sup>The possible exception that first comes to mind is that of René Char because of the richness of his figurative sense and, above all, the fact that poetry itself plays such a prominent part as a figure in his poems. However, the similarity breaks down as soon as we consider also Char's surrealist activities as well as his political and physical participation in the underground resistance movement during the war.

<sup>4</sup>See for these as well as other recent translations, the list of Works Cited under Stevens. The heftiest of these collections are those by Blake and Kaddour (210 pages), Luyat-Moore (213 pages), and Bechka-Zouechtiagh and Mouchard (165 pages). Unfortunately, Olivier Amiel's 78-page translation of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" is currently out of print.

<sup>5</sup>First defended as a Ph. D. dissertation at the Université Paris IV in 1973, Benamou's work was also reprinted two years later by the Presses Universitaires de Lille.

<sup>6</sup>The constitution of the grammar and of the articulate syntax of the French language corresponds, indeed, to the political foundations of a State that prevailed even after the Revolution. The "Code Civil" was once given as the best example of the French stylistic ideal. Standing as a national and cultural object of identity, the French language, largely based on anthropocentric values, was designed above all to carry out a mission of civilization. Its great authors were presented as paragons of the powers and beauties of the language considered as *the* idiom of Enlightenment. A list like the Complete Works of Shakespeare in the opening pages of any dictionary equivalent to the *Oxford English Dictionary* is inconceivable in France. Even less admissible would be the presence of an index summing up the Books of the Old and New Testament. No author, no work on its own, could be accepted as a cultural reference that stands for the entire country, as the symbol or the origin of its language or its people. In French dictionaries we instead find the symbolic chart of the Greek alphabet at the outset.

<sup>7</sup>Apart from promoting a strong belief in the benefits of science for the improvement of humankind, the positivist movement, founder of the free and obligatory school system, was already tacitly atheist at the turn of the century. Contrary to what happened in America, the historic distinction between the sacred and the profane in France did not spring from any pluralistic religious (Protestant) denominations or their fierce will for independence, but from a very long succession of political conflicts and compromises with the dominion of a single religious institution, the Catholic Church.

<sup>8</sup>See my own dissertation chapters on "Puissance du principe de répétition" (249–60) and "Les unités-clés de la répétition" (372–402).

<sup>9</sup>In its symbolic range, the imagination is as much a producer as a product of culture. Its main differences from one culture to the other stem from a process of image association that obeys the cultural reflexes embedded in the history of every language. Those associations, taken as a national phenomenon, follow a common pattern in the

shades they confer to the world, which are themselves determined by the history of its people. In this sense, one can speak of literature as an anthropological *event*. The imagination, then, is present everywhere under its artistic species, however it is judged and whatever form it takes.

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## “A Funny Foreigner of Meek Address”: Stevens and English as a Foreign Language

NATALIE GERBER

IN HER ESSAY “Stevens’ Armchair Travel: The Sound of the Foreign,” Alison Rieke argues that Stevens uses “shifts in sound and sense to travel with words as his vehicle” (165). This present essay provides an addendum to that discussion, showing how Stevens also uses foreign words, particularly French words, because their stress pattern is distinct from that of English words. In early poems, Stevens turns to the variant stress pattern of foreign words not so much to satisfy the metrical pattern of his iambic pentameter verse, as to achieve self-conscious, often comic ends. By his mature poetry, the co-presence of words with competing stress patterns serves more philosophical ends, drawing attention to a pervasive concern in Stevens: the variable nature of description, both in our articulation of language and in our articulation of experience.

Being fluent in French likely helped Stevens escape not only the tyranny of a single language with its fixed appellation for an object but also the tyranny of a single sound system, as French stress differs pronouncedly from English stress. An oversimplification of the differences between these two stress systems is that while most English word stress is non-final,<sup>1</sup> French words, which lack inherent stress, tend to have their final syllable stressed unless that syllable is schwa, \ə\. In fact, a subset of exceptions to word stress in English is exactly those French loan words which retain their native language’s tendency to stress the final syllable. In their seminal work, “On Stress and Linguistic Rhythm,” linguists Mark Liberman and Alan Prince designate French loan words as a categorical exception to the Lexical Category Prominence Rule (LCPR), the rule that determines word stress in English:

Words like *pontoon*, *marquis*, *serenade* belong to a sizable class of words, identifiable by the shape of the last syllable, that have kept their end-stressing in the passage from one side of the English Channel to the other. (304)

Liberman and Prince then reformulate their rule as follows:

(91) *LCPR*

In the configuration  $_{[N1, N2]}$  within a lexical category,  $_{N2}$  is *strong* iff:<sup>2</sup>

- A. It branches, or
- B. It immediately dominates [+F] (305)

where [+F] is the designation for words with French endings. The influence of French on English is, therefore, remarkably strong, a fact that Stevens, with his passion for dictionaries and etymologies, was surely sensitive to (Rieke 176 n 3). His self-conscious incorporation of French words into his patently American iambic pentameter verse displays a subtle awareness of the nature of sound and a virtuosic skill in abstracting the principles of stress.

At the most transparent level, Stevens' use of French words creates a contrast with the stress pattern of English words. Given that nouns in English largely lack stress on their final syllables,<sup>3</sup> Stevens frequently appeals to a foreign noun, or to the foreign pronunciation of an English derivative, seemingly to fill out the syllable count of a line (e.g., 'am-bi-'ance) or to satisfy a requirement for metrical stress in a line-final position (e.g., tou-'can, 'de-noue-'ment, a-'lloys). This is represented in the scansion of the following lines, where the five duple feet of iambic pentameter are represented by the reiterative symbols "w" and "s" for weak and strong positions.<sup>4</sup>

In spite of hawk and falcon, green toucan (*CP* 30)

w s w s w s w s w s

Inspecting the cabildo, the façade (*CP* 32)

w s w s w s w s w s

Attach. It seemed haphazard denouement (*CP* 40)

w s w s w s w s w s

A vital, linear ambiance. The flare (*CP* 379)

w s w s w s w s w s

His infinite repetition and alloys (*CP* 144)

w s w s w s w s w s

Such recourse has been available to poets since Chaucer, who similarly delighted in stylizing the variable syllable count and contrasting stress patterns inhering in French words and their English derivatives. Yet Stevens surpasses past example, which largely draws on foreign words or articulations for aesthetic ends. Stevens' practice suggests that he incorporates the foreign as a means of creating a wider phonetic environment within which English is immersed. Simply insisting that foreign words compete

with English ones diminishes the descriptive force of a single language. Thus, Stevens draws attention to the foreign sounds of French, positioning two sonically similar words derived from French language and literature close together, as in the lines below:

Less prickly and much more condign than that  
 W S W S W S W S W S

He once thought necessary. Like Candide (CP 42)  
 W S W S W S W S

He also juxtaposes French words with English ones, permitting two words sharing final stress to achieve a sonic coherence in opposition to their clash of linguistic environment.

Just where it was, oh beau caboose . . . It was part (CP 347)  
 W S W S W S W S W S

Of medium nature, this farouche extreme (CP 448)  
 W S W S W S W S W S

Good-fortuner of the grotesque, patroon,  
 W S W S W S W S W S

A funny foreigner of meek address (CP 371)  
 W S W S W S W S W S

These conjunctions promote phonetic immediacy over linguistic membership and suggest a certain malleability between and within languages. It is not surprising, therefore, that Stevens also interfuses languages, inventing his own patois of hybrid words, such as “whirroos” and “gramaphoon”:

And unfamiliar escapades: whirroos (CP 442)  
 W S W S W S W S W S

All afternoon the gramophone (CP 268)  
 W S W S W S W S

All afternoon the gramaphoon (CP 268)  
 W S W S W S W S

Parl-parled the West-Indian hurricane (CP 268)  
 W S W S W S W S

In the first line, an “English” word with final stress is again positioned adjacent to a word with a French ending (*-ade*) that attracts final stress, and the invented word itself is formed by the superimposition of a French ending (*-oo*). The remaining lines demonstrate the transformation of an English word into a nonsense word with a French ending (*-oon*) in an environment of foreign words (“Parl-parled”) and words bearing final stress (“afternoon”; “hurricane”). Interestingly, the French verb *parler* is itself transformed into a hybrid compound, which perhaps further suggests the colonial plasticity of language in the islands.<sup>5</sup>

Stevens’ somewhat libertine techniques thus pointedly exaggerate and abstract rhythmic properties of language. For while stress is fixed in individual words, this stress can, under certain circumstances, be altered depending on the words’ immediate environment. Generally, rules that affect the assignment of stress in English refer to syntactic groupings. Stevens’ peculiar innovation is to allow the sounds and linguistic origin of surrounding words to impact the constituent sounds of English words. The effect of modifying the rhythmic contour of a word according to its phonological environment is to realize that the process of description in language is relative and that therefore any attempt to describe physical reality via language—certainly via any single language—is fundamentally unfixed.

Of course, the danger of such a subtle rhythmic intelligence is that one’s virtuosity may be mistaken for mere bamboozling ignorance. It is a possibility that Stevens explores with gusto in his early verse. The young, would-be poet portrayed in *Harmonium*, particularly in “The Comedian as the Letter C,” may aspire to all things French, yet his ungainly anglicizations of foreign words betray his rude attempts to claim the *beau monde*.<sup>6</sup> The tension between the correct French pronunciation of the underlined words below and the less elegant English pronunciation required by the meter allows Stevens the poet to comment ironically and wordlessly upon the poetic productions of the young speaker:

Polyphony beyond his baton’s thrust<sup>7</sup> (CP 28)

w s w s w s    w s w    s

The valet in the tempest was annulled (CP 29)

w s w s w s    w    s w s

When amorists grow bald, then amours shrink (CP 15)

w s w s    w    s    w s w    s

While these lines teeter in their attempt to import French elegance to American verse, others botch the French entirely, misplacing the main stress of a French word in a weak position in the meter. The only metrical solution is to assume that the poetic speaker pronounces these words as if



tal vocabulary. Instead of using foreign words to defamiliarize the sounds of words in English, Stevens allows the sounds of English words to reverberate within the metrical frame of his poem until the very abstractness of their sound qua sound makes them appear to be irretrievably foreign.

As Stevens' early, strenuously comic verse derives its force from appealing to shifts in phonological description licensed by the competing stress systems of different languages, his later, philosophical verse achieves its infinite modulation of ideas by appealing to phonological shifts in English words generated by their variable metrical arrangement.<sup>10</sup> Using the metrical frame as a refined instrument capable of rendering any subtle variations in the sound of words, Stevens repeats individual words and phrases, positioning each one differently with respect to the meter and therefore slightly altering the contour of its sound at each moment:

We reason about them with a later reason (CP 399)  
 w s w s w s w s w s em

The first red of red winter, winter-red (CP 457)  
 w s w s w s w s w s

s

It can never be satisfied, the mind, never (CP 247)  
 w s w s w s w s w s

The alteration of metrical environment—parallel to the alteration of linguistic environment demonstrated above by words from the French conveyed into English—gives rise to slight sonic modulations that impart seeming shifts in semantic import. In the first line, the conventional firmness of “reason” yields to a “later reason,” whose altered sound contour, vis-à-vis the meter, implies a change in reasoning.<sup>11</sup> In the second line, the subtle, shifting hues of “red” result from the word’s varying placement relative both to the meter (in weak and in strong position) and to surrounding words. The line is a particularly good example of Stevens’ fascination with the shift in stress that results between adjectival and nominal forms of the same word, as well as the stress difference adhering between a noun phrase, which receives greatest stress on the last nominal element (red WINTER), and a compound noun, which receives greater stress on the first noun (WINTER-red). Instead of clarifying what “red” or a particular kind of red is, these grammatical shifts, compounded by the rhythmic modulations resulting from a changing metrical environment, serve to dislocate any objective sense of “redness.” In the third example, the unredundant repetition of the word “never” effectively unmoors the line from final resolution. Whatever the scansion of the line may be—the scansion indicated above is only one of several possibilities—the first and second “never” fall differently into the metrical template, and the distinct

rhythmic emphasis given to the final “never” undercuts the finality it appears to pronounce.

This sort of philosophical equivocation made buoyant by ever-constant shifts in the language is the genius of Stevens’ metrical poetry. The effect of the dissonance between a word’s inherent stress in isolation and its modified emphasis in a particular metrical and syntactic environment is a kind of record of the excited state of an atom, whose energetic signature shifts even as its abstract identity remains the same. Stevens suggests as much in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” when he quotes Wordsworth, who calls the first volume of the *Lyrical Ballads* “ ‘an experiment, which, I hoped, might be of some use to ascertain how far, by fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of man in a state of vivid sensation, that sort of pleasure and that quantity of pleasure may be imparted, which a Poet may rationally endeavour to impart’ ” (NA 13–14). Stevens clearly follows Wordsworth in using the metrical frame to impose a meaningful design upon the “real language of man,” yet Stevens’ unique contribution is to impart vivid sensation not merely by colliding words from different levels of diction and linguistic environments but also by allowing slightly different rhythmic signatures of the same English words to collide until the presence of multiple forms unmoors the words’ conventional meaning. The resulting defamiliarization of words and the ideas or objects they represent undoes the implicit correlation between linguistic description and phenomenal reality, the bedrock of the poet’s task to name and thus to render description as the efficacious re-imagination of the world.

In contrast, Stevens’ poetic task is to return us to the mere fact of description and its inherent, relative nature. Any bit of language is only one and, for Stevens, meaningfully one, of many sonic signatures. No description in language can be the final arbiter of emphasis, yet each enters back into the context of a world whose propositional content infinitely shifts, as we now recognize its linguistic content to do so as well. Instead of provoking anxiety, this state of affairs provokes play in Stevens. His pressure of imagination meets this pressure of reality with constitutional relish, transforming our poverty into a wealth of pluralistic invention, as he writes in “Esthétique du Mal”: “Natives of poverty, children of malheur, / The gaiety of language is our seigneur” (CP 322).

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Given that both major influences on English phonology, Romance languages and Germanic languages, lack final stress (most Romance languages tend to have penultimate stress, and Germanic languages possess initial stress), few words in English have final stress.

<sup>2</sup>A strong syllable is stressed. Therefore, a syllable that is [+F] would receive stress. “Iff” means “if” and only “if.”

<sup>3</sup>Nouns in English are subject to a special rule of stress assignment called “Noun Extrametricality.” Roughly, this rule ignores a noun’s final syllable (technically, its “rhyme”) when assigning word stress. For a discussion of this rule, see Hogg and McCully 114–17.

<sup>4</sup>The basic assumptions of my method of scansion are that the iambic pentameter consists of a template of five duple feet organized into a series of alternating weak and strong metrical positions; that the maximal position size corresponds with a prosodic unit of linguistic weight known as a phonological foot; and that a strong syllable of a polysyllabic word is prohibited from occurring in weak positions. See Hanson and Kiparsky for a discussion of the theory on which my methodology is based.

<sup>5</sup>I am grateful to one of my anonymous reviewers for pointing out both that “hurricane” is itself a West Indian word and that the hybrid word “Parl-parled” speaks to the potential reinvention of colonizers’ language by the indigenous people.

<sup>6</sup>The hallmarks of French culture come in for comic reappraisal in Stevens’ verse. In “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” Stevens pokes fun at our desires for high society and elevated charm, punning on *beau monde* with his invented phrase, “beau mont”: “It is to the hero of midnight that we pray / On a hill of stones to make beau mont thereof” (CP 466). He also allows the “bastardized” images of European culture, misapprehended by the overreaching young poet, to symbolize the American artist’s misguided pretensions to high European culture. In the poem “Montrachet-le-Jardin,” the poet disavows “Bastard chateaux and smoky demoiselles” (CP 263) in favor of a starker, more elemental art.

<sup>7</sup>The pronunciation of “baton” with stress on the first syllable is typical of British English. In American English, it is standard to stress the second syllable.

<sup>8</sup>Stevens’ metrical practice is too virtuosic for these misplacements of French stress to be accidental. Given their attestation in his verse and the lack of a similar misplacement of English stress, these linguistic gaffes should be viewed as the playful slips of a poet consciously framing himself as a homegrown American artist in contrast to the worldly ambitions of the so-called international modernists. Against their robust allusions to European culture and free assimilation of foreign phrases, Stevens’ imports from the French are self-conscious and, often, pointedly ironic. The reader is meant to recognize the uneasy alliances forged between the iambic pentameter tradition of English verse and the reassignment of French words within this framework as a kind of prosodic *détente* as much as a virtuosic joke. Stevens’ early metrical verse, with its highly ironized treatment of both its inherited tradition of the English iambic pentameter and the foreign flourishes emblematic of international advances, casts the situation of the American poet attempting to craft his own art.

<sup>9</sup>Stevens’ fondness for linguistic play and multilingual jokes was also characteristic of other members of Walter Arensberg’s salon, all of whom spoke fluent French and most of whom, except Stevens, had traveled or lived in France. During the years Stevens attended the salon, the artists often bantered together wittily in French as naturally as in English. At least two notable members, Arensberg and Marcel Duchamp, frequently used puns, anagrams, and other language games in their art to convey, as Arensberg phrased it, the doubleness of existence and the “ ‘difference between what things *are* and what things *seem*’ ” (Walter Arensberg 11; quoted in MacLeod 31). For example, Duchamp’s famous female persona, “*Rose Sélavy*” (which can be pronounced either as “ ‘Eros c’est la vie’ or ‘arrose la vie’ ” [Naumann 129]) signed works involving complex puns such as “Fresh Widow” (1920)—a readymade of a French window—insisting on the dual nature of both artwork and artist (*Salt Seller* vi–vii; 110–11; Cabanne 65–66). Stevens’ puns are likely of the same ilk, using the similitude in sound and

divergence in meaning to play with the variable aspects of reality and our constructions of it. A small sampling of Stevens' multi- and monolingual puns can be found in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," which in itself makes much of the pun on *heaven/haven*; see *beau mont/beau monde* (CP 466); *avowel/a vowel* (CP 471); *words/world* (CP 474). For a discussion of Stevens' involvement with the Arensberg salon, see MacLeod 26–41; for a selection of Duchamp's puns and a discussion of their psychic function in his art, see *Salt Seller* 105–19 and Schwarz 508–10, respectively; for Arensberg's interest in language games, see Naumann, "Cryptography and the Arensberg Circle."

<sup>10</sup> Stevens also defamiliarizes English words by positioning them into the meter according to a less frequently articulated pattern of stress. The following examples are parallel to the variable realization of the stress contours of French words and their English derivatives:

More exquisite than any tumbling verse (CP 37)

w s w s w s w s w s

Of ocean, perfected in indolence (CP 102)

w s w s w s w s w s

<sup>11</sup> Of course the presence of the adjective "later" affects this change, not solely for its content but for its effect on the stress of the word "reason," since stress in English is sensitive to syntactic structure. See the discussion of the Nuclear Stress Rule, which governs phrasal categories, in Chomsky and Halle 102–03.

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## Haunting the *Corpus Delicti*: Rafael Campo's *What the Body Told* and Wallace Stevens' (Modernist) Body

LÁZARO LIMA

**W**HAT THE BODY TOLD, a volume of poems by the Cuban-American poet Rafael Campo (b. 1964), addresses how formal poetry may give form to loss and memory in the age of AIDS by structuring an exchange between the literary institutions that privilege poetry as a representational medium and the inability of language adequately to account for and remember loss. Campo's *What the Body Told* haunts modernism's legacy by construing it as the *corpus delicti*, literally the body of the crime, where "crime" is conceived as the insufficiency of modernist aesthetic agencies to give evidence of the "truth" about the body.<sup>1</sup> Campo's ghostly demarcations of the *corpus delicti*, through a search for keener sounds, are established in his implicit dialogue with modernism in general and with Wallace Stevens in particular.

Stevens, who has been variously read as a reluctant modernist and modernist *extraordinaire*, embodies for Campo an aesthetic meditation on the representational crisis between ontology and epistemology: the crisis between *being* and *knowing* that Stevens' poetic language grapples with as a necessary but inadequate communicative medium. In his dialogue with Stevens, Campo attempts to confront the inadequacy of the modernist literary theory of aesthetic autonomy by establishing an intertextual dialogue with his interlocutor.<sup>2</sup> My reference to Stevens as Campo's "intertext" is intentional and signals Campo's own provocative deauthorization of the modernist notion of "genius" as a trope. Indeed, in this essay I will argue that rather than deconstructing the New Critical conceit of aesthetic autonomy—a hallmark of Latino protest poetry—Campo constructs an inter-American continuum of literary ties and dependencies that he posits as the necessary prerequisite for a poetics of intercultural engagement. As I will show, Campo suggests that intercultural engagement is the figuration of dependent continuities and not a necessary rupture between one aesthetic and another. The aesthetic continuities with Stevens that Campo establishes as an ethnically and culturally marked "Other" are significant because they signal a turn away from direct confrontation in the relation-

ship of self-identified ethnic writing with the master narratives of American cultural identity. That Stevens is Campo's interlocutor is also suggestive because it promotes a conversation among presumed equals; even if this conversation is with Stevens' specter, that is, with the malleable legacy of his words in their ability to perform on our cultural consciousness in general and on Latino cultural identity in particular. I argue that Stevens' "afterlife" is as much at stake in Campo's conversation with modernist aesthetic agencies as the weight accorded to this embodied modern called Stevens.

Andrew Lakritz has recently noted that Stevens, along with other masters of the "constellation of modernist American verse" like Eliot, Frost, Pound, Williams, and Crane, attempts to answer the quintessential modernist question, "[H]ow does one remake a poetry, and a culture, on the grounds of an exhausted tradition?" (1). For Stevens, this was a daunting question indeed, but one that he attempted to answer roughly within the constraints of New Criticism's emphasis on "aesthetic autonomy." The Anglo-American New Criticism's call for aesthetic autonomy registered an important metaphor in its desire for "a close reading," a practice that simultaneously created and reinforced the cult of genius, since it relied on the belief that the poet's intention was tantamount to his artistic truth. (I say *his* intentionally; Marianne Moore, who was loosely associated with the American modernists, was one of very few female poets to be canonized in American letters as a modernist, and this only several decades after the fact.) A close reading demanded above all else a hermeneutics of engagement within the text's formal boundaries, an analysis of and for meaning that considered the text to be an autonomous cultural artifact produced by a great mind. Crudely speaking, this posited the poet as the purveyor of "truth" and the critic as the purveyor of meaning.

For American New Criticism, this critic-centered monopoly on meaning, as Frank Lentricchia reminds us, had "the ideological effect in the United States of sustaining, under conditions of higher education, the romantic cult of genius by dispossessing middle-class readers of their active participation in the shaping of a culture and a society 'of and for the people.' The New Criticism strip[ped] those readers of their right to think of themselves as culturally central storytellers" (6). Lentricchia is too generous, of course, in his critique of modernist aesthetic agencies. His singular concern for the middle-class reader still leaves too many "culturally central storytellers" outside New Criticism's prison-house of meaning.

If Lentricchia is right about New Criticism's ideological hegemony on American culture, and the weight of his critical authority should indemnify me (an irony he might not appreciate given his avowedly anti-authoritarian materialist critique of modernism), then what is it precisely that interests Campo in this "modernist" Stevens? As a Cuban-American poet, should he not write of things Cuban, at least the experience of being a Latino? Curiously, Campo's fascination with Stevens has less to do with

disassociating himself from an ethnic identity than it does with associating Stevens with Cuban and Cuban-American literary history. Stevens' literal and metaphorical ties to Cuba and Cuba's premier organ of modernism, *Orígenes: Revista de arte y literatura*, provide a telling answer.

Wallace Stevens and José Rodríguez Feo, the Cuban founder and one of the editors of Cuba's influential *Orígenes*, carried on an epistolary dialogue that resulted in an enduring friendship as evidenced by the ninety-eight extant letters they shared between 1944 and Stevens' death in 1955.<sup>3</sup> Though Rodríguez Feo was only twenty-four when he began his correspondence with Stevens, the two men had much in common. Both had graduated from Harvard and shared an interest in George Santayana as well as an appreciation of Cuban things (Coyle and Filreis 2). Stevens' own affinities with the younger Rodríguez Feo become clear when he tells the young man in a letter dated 20 June 1945 that "Even though there appears to be a vast difference between us in respect to our age, I am most interested in finding out how alike we are" (60).

Rodríguez Feo admired Stevens and was the first to translate Stevens' poetry into Spanish for *Orígenes*, allowing his Cuban readership to be the first Spanish-speaking audience to appreciate the American modernist (6). During the almost eleven-year course of their friendship Stevens had occasion to send Rodríguez Feo some " 'lovely ties' " (3) that the young man no doubt appreciated because they were a symbol of both the *literary ties* established between the two and of their collaboration. The literal and metaphorical ties with Cuba were evident in Stevens' own concern for the nature of "Cuban things" in *Orígenes*, which, as I will later suggest, found its complement in his own concern for things American. Stevens chides Rodríguez Feo for including too many "un-Cuban" things in *Orígenes*:

Assuming that you have a passion for Cuba, you cannot have, or at least you cannot indulge in, a passion for Brinnin and Levin. . . . [I]t is a question of expressing the genius of your country, disengaging it from the mere mass of things, and doing this by every poem, every essay, every short story which you publish—and every drawing by Mariano, or anyone else. . . . *Cuba should be full of Cuban things* and not essays on Chaucer.<sup>4</sup> (57; my emphasis)

The advice to the young man manifested itself in a poem Stevens wrote for Rodríguez Feo, "A Word with José Rodríguez-Feo," which appeared in Stevens' collection *Transport to Summer*. Stevens' advice is summarized in the last lines from the poem's first stanza where the poetic persona asks, "Night is the nature of man's interior world? / Is lunar Habana the Cuba of the self?" (CP 333). Stevens' use of *Habana* and not Havana in his last rhetorical question is important in that Cuba's "self" is linguistically marked (*Habana*); implying that "night" (the unknown) is not the nature

of one's true self, his or her "interior world." The essence of things Cuban resides in language, performed in the poem by the signifier *Habana*; that is, identity inflected by the specificity of language, *Habana* as a Cuban thing.

Stevens' concern for things Cuban in a Cuban journal edited by Cubans reflected his own anxieties about things American, a concern that made him note, "Nothing could be more inappropriate to American literature than its English source since the Americans are not British in sensibility" (cited in Rehder 95). Robert Rehder has observed that for Stevens, "[b]eing an American poet . . . was the inevitable consequence of living in America" (97). In addition to location as the arbiter for defining what is American in Stevens, Rehder notes that Stevens "needed Europe in order to define America" and goes on to claim that Stevens' poem "Academic Discourse at Havana" was precisely about defining America in contradistinction to Europe (97).

It is curious that Stevens' fascination with Cuban things was such that conceptualizing America—that is, the United States—meant defamiliarizing America and recreating it in another place, Cuba. I cite the first two sections from Stevens' decidedly hermetic poem (reprinted in *Ideas of Order*):

## I

Canaries in the morning, orchestras  
In the afternoon, balloons at night. That is  
A difference, at least, from nightingales,  
Jehovah and the great sea-worm. The air  
Is not so elemental nor the earth  
So near.

But the sustenance of the wilderness  
Does not sustain us in the metropolises.

## II

Life is an old casino in a park.  
The bills of the swans are flat upon the ground.  
A most desolate wind has chilled Rouge-Fatima  
And a grand decadence settles down like cold.

(CP 142)

The modernist question I cited earlier ("[H]ow does one remake a poetry, and a culture, on the grounds of an exhausted tradition?") finds a tentative resolution in this poem. Within the internal logic of the poem, the *locus amoenus* is America, broadly conceived. The topos of the *locus amoenus* is reconceptualized in the figuration of the "casino in a park," which also serves as a metaphor for life: "Life is an old casino in a park." That is, life is seen as a gamble (the casino) in a place (park/*locus amoenus*)

where “the sustenance of the wilderness / Does not sustain us in the metropolises.” This place of “wilderness” may be taken to refer to the new American *locus amoenus*. The medieval cultural topos of the *locus amoenus* is literally transported to another place away from the “metropolises.” Stevens’ poetic voice, the “us,” creates a subject of enunciation that identifies with the “old casino” (the old life/the old continent) brought to the “wilderness” (America)—Europe in America, if you like. Life in the “wilderness,” however, cannot sustain the needs of those who live in “the metropolises,” the “us” in the poem. Conversely, this new place requires a new language if it is to flourish. The distinction between competing forms of identity, Europe (the old) and America (the new), is further reinforced by the “grand decadence” that “settles down like cold.” This is meant to suggest the northern imposition of form, literally climatological in this instance, in a new place that cannot accommodate an old form, figuratively an old aesthetic. This “cold” from the north (Europe) settles on the park (America) and chills “Rouge-Fatima.” Even Rouge-Fatima (Fatima is the Portuguese name for [the Virgin] Mary), red-warm María, if you will, is cold, the red suggesting the warmth of the South subjected to the North’s cold imposition of form.

The significance of “swans” and “decadence” in the second stanza is perhaps most important in situating the thematic axis of the poem in relation to its form. It reinforces how the imposition of an old form in a new environment is culturally inappropriate. The swan is suggestive both of Latin American *Modernismo*’s “swan” *par excellence*, Ruben Darío (1867–1916), and of his modernist attempt to establish an aesthetic rupture with the old, with the heavy weight of Spain bearing on *América*, through a kind of “decadence” (itself understood as an attempt to supersede one aesthetic by another). Stevens conjures Darío’s modernist recourse to aesthetic *decadence* as a response to *América*’s cultural *dependence* on Europe: Darío’s attempt at revitalizing modernist aesthetic agencies under the aegis of something “new,” *Modernismo americano* proper, in another place, *América*. I would like to suggest that Stevens’ “Academic Discourse at Havana” attempts to define America by virtue of what (to him) it is not. He accomplishes this by defamiliarizing America and recreating it as *América*, *à la* Darío. Stevens thus removes himself twice from the American identity problem he attempts to work out in the poem by displacing it both geographically and culturally: a Cuban locale (the ostensible discourse at Havana) and a Latin-American aesthetic movement (*Modernismo*).

In deferring the problem of American cultural identity by way of the swan, the poetic voice can summarize the issues of cultural dependency that inform the poem’s thematic axis: “The world is not / The bauble of the sleepless nor a word / That should import a universal pith / To Cuba” (CP 144). That is, reality (and I would suggest, ideology) is neither a dream (“The bauble of the sleepless”) nor dependent on form for verification (the modernist last “word,” as it were); rather it is coterminous with lan-

guage ("the word") but not subservient to it. The poetic voice's "incantation" ends the poem by making the displacement of aesthetic agencies, from America to *América*, clear:

And the old casino likewise may define  
An infinite incantation of our selves  
In the grand decadence of the perished swans. (CP 145)

The "old casino" is conceived as a modernist conceit: the belief in language's ability to account for reality can "define" (impose a form upon reality) an identity ("incantation of our selves," where incantation, of course, suggests words that are to produce magical results) infinitely—in and through language—but this will not change the fact that swans perish. The symbolic death of the swan is also the death of language, crudely embodied in the figure of the genius, the poet as purveyor of meaning and truth. Stevens' body of evidence seems to suggest a tone of resignation before the "word," his lack of "rage against the dying of the light." His resignation is related to the recognition that an attempt to supersede one aesthetic by another merely reinstates one hegemony in place of another: replacing one aesthetic by another is another way of replacing one master by another. If Rehder is right in saying that "'Academic Discourse at Havana' shows Stevens' relation to British literature . . . in the warm South of the imagination" (97), and I believe he partly is,<sup>5</sup> then the pith of America for this quintessential American modernist is up for grabs. As a privileged New Critical "voice of genius," Stevens speaks softly and goes quietly into the night. Responding to the question, "[H]ow does one remake a poetry, and a culture, on the grounds of an exhausted tradition?" Stevens seems to be saying that no poetic or cultural identity can be fully comprehended or adequately articulated by language; even the privileged practitioners of language, like the swan, ultimately perish. What remains is the utterance, the trace of the essence, but not "the" essence.

Campo takes Stevens' critical legacy to task, wishing, it would seem, to do what the Mexican poet Enrique González Martínez was purported to have attempted with Darío when he symbolically commanded, "Tuércele el cuello al cisne de engañoso plumaje" ("Wring the neck of the swan with suspect plumage"), in his aptly named sonnet, "Tuércele el cuello al cisne" (Anderson Imbert and Florit 139). The similarities with Stevens notwithstanding, Campo's perspective ultimately differs in important degrees from Stevens' with regard to their relationship with language. Where words are ultimately bound to their insufficiency in Stevens' universe of meaning, Campo offers the materiality of the body as evidence of another type of writing, another type of meaning: the body as a greater sort of writing, the body semanticized.

Rafael Campo, a practicing physician and AIDS treatment specialist at Harvard Medical School, is the author of two other poetry collections, *The*

*Other Man Was Me: A Voyage to the New World* and, more recently, *Diva*. Like Stevens and Rodríguez Feo, he attended Harvard, and he shares obvious ties with these cultural producers' interest in "things Cuban," ties that ethnically mark much of his poetry. *What the Body Told* extends the two main concerns evinced in his previous collection: identity and corporeality. Campo posits in this collection that words may be the most vital of the body's parts. The volume is divided into five sections: "Defining Us," "Canciones de la vida," "For You All Beauty," "Canciones de la muerte," and the titular section, "What the Body Told." My specific concern will be, as I noted earlier, with Campo's rewriting of Stevens' legacy as it pertains to "things Cuban" and his implicit critique of modernism. Aside from other broader similarities with Stevens—for example, the use of iambic pentameter and correlative verse—I will focus on one of Campo's most important intertextual rewrites: the thematic rewriting of Stevens' "The Cuban Doctor," a poem that was first published in *Poetry* (October 1921) and then included in *Harmonium*. I focus specifically on this poem because it is emblematic of Campo's engagement and dialogue with Stevens' version of modernist aesthetic agencies, especially as it pertains to my expressed concerns for figurations of the corporeal. I will demonstrate how Campo performs a reverse narrative of authority while rewriting Stevens' thematics (signifiers) by altering Stevens' connotative language (signifieds).

Campo's intervention in the field of Latino poetry is significant because it marks a discernible turn away from Latino poetry's emblematic emphasis on social protest toward a conception of poetry as an engagement with the cultural milieu from which it emerges and not an indictment of that cultural milieu.<sup>6</sup> That is, sparing his audience responses to the imposition of form, language, and cultural identity, Campo reinvests the protocols of modernist aesthetic agencies with present meaning by superseding its referent, its cultural authority. In so doing, Campo attempts to shape "American" poetry by making his own contribution. This contribution takes the form of engagement: that is, a dialogue staged among equal cultural actors that questions authority in order to shape it, not overturn it. The modernist turn away from the commodification of language through a hermeneutic disassociation that made poetry hard to consume did not make this poetic tradition indigestible for Campo, a fact that he emphasizes through his parody of "mastery." Parody—in Campo's case the ostensible parody of New Criticism's cult of poetic genius—thus implies that the object of protest itself (modernism and its poetic conceits) has been mastered to the point where the performance of mastery supersedes its referent. Campo puts into question modernism's presumptuous cultural authority, its hegemony in the cultural sphere, by linking intercultural experiences: the decidedly American modernist Stevens' own consumption of Cubanalia (those things purported to be distinctly Cuban) that begs a logical question: Just who is using whom?

Campo's "The Good Doctor" is a revision of Stevens' underdiscussed "The Cuban Doctor." In Campo's version, *the good doctor* is literally a *Cuban doctor* insofar as the poetic persona draws a parallel between the doctor in the poem and the explicit poet who is also a doctor, Campo himself. Biography, a casualty of New Criticism's reification of meaning within the poem, thus combines with poesy as a valid aesthetic dimension to be factored in the construction of meaning.

A doctor lived in a city  
Full of dying men and women.  
He ministered to them  
A medicine admittedly

Not curative, and only  
Slightly toxic. The medicine  
Was known as empathy. It worked  
Until the doctor grew more lonely—

His patients only died less quickly—  
And in a fit of rage  
He burned its formula.  
Word spread to the sickly

As the virus had: precise  
And red, omitting nothing.  
The doctor's reputation changed.  
No longer was he viewed as wise;

Instead, when patients came  
To him they brought suspicion;  
They held their breath when he would try  
To hear their songs. His names,

Once various and musical,  
Were soon forgotten.  
When he died of the disease,  
They left him where he fell.

(*What the Body Told* 60)

The theme of the poem is, of course, death, literally and metaphorically conceived. The doctor's loss of faith in his words equals his literal death. "Once various and musical," the doctor's words, like the poet's truth and belief in language and the word, signal an ontological crisis in meaning. The literal crisis in meaning results in the doctor's inability to care for his patients' bodies with his usual dosage of "empathy," understood as his

words' ability to soothe, which had once allowed the patients to die "less quickly," even if this medicine was "admittedly / Not curative, and only / Slightly toxic." Figuratively, the "medicine" that fails is his own faith in both the discourse about medicine's ability to save the bodies he treats and, more important, the inability of language to comprehend that loss.

The figuration of the doctor must be understood, then, on two different connotative planes. On the literal plane, the poetic persona's limitations wrought by the unnamed disease—the specter of AIDS—are the cause of his literal death in that the disease leaves him incompetent to treat, to read, if you will, his patients' signs of illness appropriately and cure them. This crisis in meaning, understood as his inability to perform his role as a doctor adequately and competently, occasions another crisis in meaning, in this instance a metaphorical crisis. The metaphorical crisis in meaning is the result of his loss of faith in language, as the doctor is also a practitioner of language, a language that no longer serves meaning but becomes subservient to it in its inability to account for loss: "His patients only died less quickly" even when he had "ministered to them."

The powerful figuration of language as a virus is introduced in the fourth stanza when, after he burns his formula (his doses of empathetic words as a poultice, a deferral of death), "Word spread to the sickly / As the virus had: precise / And red, omitting nothing."<sup>7</sup> "Word" here refers to language and associates language with "virus": "Word spread . . . As the virus had" spread. Once the doctor loses his literal faith (in his ability to perform his duties) and his metaphorical faith (in his ability to account for the "city / Full of dying men and women") his patients bring "suspicion." Suspicion is brought both literally, to the doctor's office, and metaphorically, to the poet's house of meaning. Yet this very suspicion is not for want, as it were. The doctor's own body becomes evidence of the epistemic inability to cure or provide solace, but all is not in vain. The doctor/poet's body *is* the cultural *corpus delicti*: the body of the viral crime for which the doctor/poet's body serves as evidence. Though "His names" (doctor/poet) "Were soon forgotten," the body remains as evidence "where he fell"; the doctor/poet's body here too is evidence of loss. The body left where it "fell" is devoid of language and identity; it cannot speak and its identity is stripped of its use value (the body "identified" as both a practitioner of language and of medicine). Then comes the body's haunting of language and the spaces of memory.

Avery F. Gordon, in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, conjures "haunting" in the following manner:

Haunting is a constituent element of modern social life. It is neither premodern superstition nor individual psychosis; it is a generalizable social phenomenon of great import. To study social life one must confront the ghostly aspects of it. This confrontation requires (or produces) a fundamental change in the

way we know and make knowledge, in our mode of production. (7)

For Gordon, this entails a “thoroughgoing epistemological critique of modernity as what is contemporaneously ours with an insurgent sociological critique of its forms of domination” (10–11). Following Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s critique of modernity, Gordon engages their “On the Theory of Ghosts” (from *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*) in order to designate a space of meaning that recognizes an “Other-knowledge,” the weight of memory, the contours of feeling, and the shapes of desire’s willingness and need to *know* a lost sense of *being* through the legacy of beings. The “dead” speak to the living through memory: hauntology.

It is in this sense that Campo’s *corpus delicti*, the poet/doctor’s body of the crime as it were, haunts and is haunted by Stevens’ fetishization of things Cuban by performing a reverse reading of modernism from the subject position of a Cuban doctor in Stevens’ America. Where Stevens’ teleology posits the end of the word as the end of meaning, Campo’s dialogue with the ghost of modernism is meant to suggest an aesthetic rage against the dying of the light, the body understood as meaning by virtue of what it “told” when it was alive, the incomplete but necessary memory of the body.<sup>8</sup> In Stevens’ “The Cuban Doctor,” this is a variable impossibility, something that Stevens’ Cuban doctor cannot apprehend:

I went to Egypt to escape  
The Indian, but the Indian struck  
Out of his cloud and from his sky.

This was no worm bred in the moon,  
Wriggling far down the phantom air,  
And on a comfortable sofa dreamed.

The Indian struck and disappeared.  
I knew my enemy was near—I,  
Drowsing in summer’s sleepest horn. (CP 64–65)

The poem’s theme is again death and, like Campo’s rendition, it is about a literal and metaphorical death. In Stevens’ poem the Cuban doctor’s enemy is the Indian who brings death, like the virus that brought death (AIDS) in Campo’s poem. The poetic persona, the poem’s speaking subject, is a Cuban doctor who attempts to elude death by “escaping.” The Cuban doctor goes abroad (Egypt) in order to escape death, but death’s figuration, “the Indian,” strikes all the same. The Indian functions here like Campo’s “virus” in that both are the vectors of death that both doctors attempt to elude without success. In the second stanza, the Cuban doctor’s fear of death is clearly not unfounded. Death is no “worm bred in

the moon," that is, not something created in the imagination. This is further reinforced when the speaking subject affirms that death is not a ghost in the "phantom air" dreamt "on a comfortable sofa." The presence of death, the speaking voice contends, is the opposite: complete discomfort for the living doctor. Resignation before the dying of the light manifests itself here again in Stevens' poetry in the third stanza when the Cuban doctor receives death's final call: "The Indian struck and disappeared." This prompts the speaking subject to recognize that his "enemy was near." His enemy is at once the Indian's curse, death, and the inability of the poetic "I" to counter the finality of the Indian's visitation. As in Campo's version, the Cuban doctor dies, "Drowsing" suggesting permanent sleep as the poetic persona succumbs to death on summer's sleepest horn. The end of summer, "summer's sleepest horn," marks the literal Fall (the season) as well as the metaphorical fall, death.

As a Cuban doctor in Stevens' America, Campo in his dialogue with Stevens' Cuban doctor performs a haunting, a conversation with the specter of modernism and with the emblematic American modern whose fascination with things Cuban occasions his own query into that which is distinctly American. Campo's questioning of modernism's principal fiction, read by Campo as the absolution from an ethic of care of the self in the face of linguistic insufficiency—the lack of rage against the proverbial dying of the light—forces Campo to engage in the pursuit of a corporeally grounded recourse to meaning, a conceit of meaning, nonetheless, but one of ethical action. As when Odysseus visits Hades and realizes that he must listen to the dead before he can leave—since all dead souls crave an audience with the living—Campo's dialogue with modernism performs a haunting of "The Cuban Doctor" that offers the literal *corpus delicti*, the dead "Good Doctor," as evidence of the need to write as well as remember the body in theory and in deed. Neither in denial of death nor in terror of it, Campo effectively renders America's spaces of death livable through memory, the spaces of images and words.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>See Richard Poirier's illuminating discussion of the (ab)uses of modernism. He notes how "[m]odernism managed to implement, within the self-analytical mode of its texts, a form of cultural skepticism whose uniqueness was not supposed to be put into question by the fact that, sporadically, something similar is to be found earlier on. . . . Indeed, it is fair to say that these early evidences of modernism became fully appreciated, as did Melville's, only because later evidences, in Pound, Eliot, and Joyce, were made unavoidably visible" (112–13). It is this periodizing modernism, as noted by Poirier, that interests me here. My thanks to Bart Eeckhout for pointing this out as well as to the anonymous readers whose suggestions made this essay stronger than it would have otherwise been.

<sup>2</sup>See James Longenbach's *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things and Modern Poetry After Modernism* for a discussion of Stevens' own critique of aesthetic autonomy. Alan Filreis' *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World and Modernism from Right to Left* offer a critique of Stevens' exceptionalism as a modern.

<sup>3</sup>In addition to Rodríguez Feo, the other principal members of the *Orígenes* Group (*Grupo Orígenes*) were Eliseo Diego, Cintio Vitier, José Lezama Lima, Ángel Gaztelu, Fina García Marruz, Lorenzo García Vega, and the painter Mariano Rodríguez. The extant correspondence between Stevens and Rodríguez Feo has been collected, with an introduction, by Beverly Coyle and Alan Filreis in *Secretaries of the Moon: The Letters of Wallace Stevens & José Rodríguez Feo*. My page number references refer to this compilation of the correspondence.

<sup>4</sup>Stevens is referring to an essay by María Rosa Lida who later became an authority on medieval Spanish literature as well as the editor of the works of the fourteenth-century Spanish poet Juan Ruiz.

<sup>5</sup>I would however argue that Rehder completely misses Stevens' allusions to *Modernismo* symbology. Not surprisingly, for him the identity issue is merely related to a problem of America (read: the United States) vs. England.

<sup>6</sup>Rafael Pérez-Torres' recent and influential *Movements in Chicano Poetry: Against Myths, Against Margins* continues to perpetuate the view that Latino poetry's "significance" resides in its protest against established conventions and as such its status "as a resistant 'minority' critical practice is undeniable" (1).

<sup>7</sup>The contextual association here is also meant to recall William Burroughs and Laurie Anderson's appropriation of Burroughs' notion of "language as virus" in a performance song entitled "Language Is a Virus" on her CD *Home of the Brave*.

<sup>8</sup>Jacques Derrida, in *Specters of Marx*, refers to "hauntology" as a condition of "being" in our technological age that is neither in the realm of the "living nor the dead, present nor absent," but rather, interstitially located in the realm of memory (51). Derrida's notion of hauntology is reminiscent of his previous deployment of "trace." He used the term "trace" to signify that there is no simple sense in which linguistic signs are either present or absent. For him, every word, every sign, contains a trace of another sign; one sign leads to another, and so on, in a system of interconnected meanings that is paradoxically both implicit (absent) and explicit (present) at once. Curiously, in *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's Spectres of Marx* (proceedings from a symposium sponsored by the University of California at Riverside on the topic of "Whither Marxism") the editor, Michael Sprinker, does not mention the spectral associations of the volume's title with Stevens' "The Idea of Order at Key West," the poem that ends with language's auto-referential phrase, "In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds" (CP 130).

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# Stevens and Croce: Varieties of Lyrical Intuition

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## I

**A**T FIRST GLANCE, the creative lives of Wallace Stevens and his contemporary, the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce (1866–1952), show few parallels. Where Stevens could be described as aggressively private despite his public persona, Croce was undoubtedly a public figure in his role as a lifetime senator from 1910, Minister for Education under Giolitti (1920–21), and in his high-profile opposition to fascism before and during the war. Where Stevens' output esteemed poetry above all other written forms, the range of Croce's active interests was extremely wide, including aesthetics, literary criticism, history, and philosophy. Yet despite these obvious differences, it is possible to take some account of Stevens' reading and assimilation of Crocean aesthetics and to point out the compelling similarities in theory and practice of their efforts to articulate the value of lyrical poetics.

We should be aware, however, of Croce's somewhat marginal position in the pantheon of Stevens' reading, which was restricted to those works that dealt with aesthetics and the art of poetry. Stevens wrote to Henry Church in January 1941: "But is it possible to discuss aesthetic expression without at least discussing Croce?" (*L* 385). Even earlier he had penciled Croce's name on the dust-jacket of his copy of Charles Mauron's *Aesthetics and Psychology*, perhaps as a reminder to follow up his reading on this subject. We can speculate that Stevens placed Croce's aesthetic writing into the general category of the psychology of the artist and that it formed a part of the constellation of speculative aesthetics that Stevens read throughout his life as a support to his poetic task.

Despite this fairly marginal position, the value of a comparative examination becomes clear in several distinct areas. First, we have Stevens' marked copy of Croce's lecture *The Defence of Poetry: Variations on the Theme of Shelley*, now at the University of Massachusetts library, that provides direct and specific evidence of his engagement with Croce's ideas. In addition, there is compelling evidence in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," a poem composed in 1948, after Stevens' most concentrated reading

of Croce, of the transference of Crocean aesthetics into compositional imperatives. Generally defined, these shared concerns were the priorness of the value-term in poetic utterance and consequently an interest in the resistance of poetic language to conceptual determination. For both writers, such issues were central to the project of lyricism in poetry.

The best known and most well documented evidence of Stevens' reading of and influence by Croce is that which appears in the preparatory study and writing of "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" lecture. This lecture was solicited by Henry Church in 1941 for the newly established Language of Poetry series at Princeton and delivered there by Stevens in May of that year.<sup>1</sup> As part of his preparation, Stevens read the lecture delivered by Croce in Oxford in October 1933, *The Defence of Poetry: Variations on the Theme of Shelley*, and his copy contains evidence of his engagement with the text and some clues to his priorities.

A. Walton Litz has discussed Stevens' assimilation of Crocean aesthetics against the background of the debates about the possibility of *la poésie pure* in the 1920s, arguing that Croce would eventually provide for Stevens "sanction and encouragement" (118) during the period of *Ideas of Order* (1935). Litz argues perceptively that Croce's *Defence of Poetry* provided answers to pressing questions about poetry's function in the world, upholding the claims of spiritual renewal advanced by Shelley, yet mitigating this claim through consciousness of generic or technical specificities. It is these compositional decisions that will be discussed here to show Stevens' debts to and modifications of a Crocean "lyrical intuition." Croce's lecture is explicitly concerned with rescuing poetry from utility of any kind, insisting on enjoyment and renewal over the "strange immunity" of professional critics and the strictures of evidence gathering. Speaking to an audience at Oxford University which must have been full of exactly the kind of professionals he rails against, Croce demands that we must again appeal to poetry in Shelley's ambitious terms. This appeal, we recall, was for no less than a poetry that should become the acknowledged legislation of the world.

In Croce's lecture, Stevens found a voice that assumed those ambitions he had taken from his own reading of Shelley. He read Shelley's *Defence* in Ernest Rhys's *The Prelude to Poetry*, which he had been given by his mother in October 1899. His copy is marked in the margins with a youthful enthusiasm that gives pause at exactly those passages that declare the poet's high goals:

But poetry in a more restricted sense expresses those arrangements of language, and especially metrical language, which are created by that imperial faculty, whose throne is curtained within the invisible nature of man. (171)

Poetry is indeed something divine. (205)

Croce's restatement of this project in his lecture provides a model for Stevens in his own articulation of poetic "defenses," like that of "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words." Croce did not take up the position of Shelley, the voice of history that might have carried the suspicion of irrelevance to the contemporary situation, but was indisputably active in the contemporary world.

Stevens made several different types of markings in those books he annotated, which we might speculate represent differing levels of interest or "intensity." The "lowest" of these is the vertical marginal line that seems to mark a section for memory, sometimes applying to a significant portion of text, sometimes to a single sentence. These markings are mostly signposts to the argument's development and often appear at places in the text that signal intention or provide summary. Then there is underlining, which seems to represent a higher level of contact with memorable phrases, aphoristic segments that can in some way stand alone as representative of the whole thrust of the argument (Stevens' fondness for aphorism is well evidenced in his notebooks), or that denote a longer pause in reading to fix and contemplate. Marginal notes are of course explicit in the quality of their interest and the prompting to reply, agree, refute, or signify a history of engagement. It should not be suggested that this schema perfectly reveals intentional validity, but it would perhaps be a graver mistake to imagine that each mark can become of equal importance to commentary.

Stevens has marked this signpost in Croce's *Defence of Poetry* with a marginal line:

The subject of our discussion is the way in which poetry can help to preserve or refresh man's superior nature in its contest with his inferior, morality in its contest with expediency. (17)

Here then is notice of Croce's signal intent in the form of a dilemma or contestation, modifying Shelley's curative ideology. It appears as the wholly human contestation without divine apparatus to which Stevens' poetry responded in various ways throughout his career. It is helpfully contextualized as a dilemma of terms in another passage Stevens marked in the margin:

The sublime and sacred watchwords, which stirred the hearts of former ages, are either a mere laughing-stock, or quite meaningless for a generation which knows not what to make of them, and which cannot comprehend the power and fascination that they exercised, or seem to have exercised, upon its fathers and grandfathers, who still mumble the tale. (6)

It is precisely this failure of terms as an aspect of modernity that seems to motivate Stevens' efforts to consolidate a new "imagination" and "real-

ity" and his strenuous engagement with the forms of "pure poetry." Croce's "watchwords," now degraded in their power to evoke or signify in harmony with their stated ambition, find a correlative in Stevens' discussion in his lecture of the statue of Andrew Jackson in Washington's Lafayette Square:

We are concerned then with an object occupying a position as remarkable as any that can be found in the United States in which there is not the slightest trace of the imagination. Treating this work as typical, it is obvious that the American will as a principle of the mind's being is easily satisfied in its efforts to realize itself in knowing itself. The statue may be dismissed, not without speaking of it again as a thing that at least makes us conscious of ourselves as we were, if not as we are. (NA 11)

From this context of the modern failure of "degraded" terms or forms, it is clear how the priorities of the *sound* of verse come to be more explicitly involved in the effort to articulate the rigor of "as we are." For here to signify in the poetic is not so much a question of belief as one of evidence, where the form expresses itself at the moment of its consumption. Yet as Litz has pointed out, neither can Stevens, via Croce, wholly accept a pure poetic of sound, as if poetry can only aspire to the condition of music, a condition that language's forms of reference will never allow. Thus, Stevens underlines this important passage from Croce's lecture:

It is a delusion to suppose that a verse delights us by any sounds with which it stimulates our ears to ecstasy. What it stimulates to ecstasy is our imagination, and thereby our emotion. (*Defence* 23)

This imagination, of course, has still to be defined. Indeed, we might say that the trials of its definition are the very substance of Stevens' task and achievement. In another passage underlined by Stevens, Croce seems to extinguish any hope that any theory of poetry can finally articulate the path toward the replenishment of the spirit that both writers seek: "there is no causal connexion between theories of poetry and poetic creation" (20).

It is at this point that we must turn to a more detailed articulation of the implications of such an apparently hopeless dichotomy, which seems to call implicitly for some Platonic inspiration to reconcile the lack of causal connection with Croce's clear admission that the kind of poetry he seeks has been and is being written. We find such a discussion in his *The Aesthetic as the Science of Expression and of the Linguistic in General* (1902), first translated into English by Douglas Ainslie in 1909.<sup>2</sup> This work sets out Croce's crucial differentiation between intuition and expression and is

appended by the important essay "Pure Intuition and the Lyrical Character of Art" (1908), from which we may see how close are Croce's and Stevens' approaches to the formation of an adequate response to the dilemmas of the modern imagination.

## II

The formation of an aesthetic system is not a discrete aspect of a wider philosophy for Croce, but a starting point from which to comprehend a philosophy of spirit. It was his first endeavor and for him its structure fundamentally informs his subsequent thought. At the heart of his aesthetic is the insight that intuition is conceptually inseparable from expression, and that this arises from the non-conceptual and prior nature of intuitive knowledge. Such intuitive knowledge, because it is not a knowledge of concepts, must be particular or individual, as intellectual knowledge is a knowledge of universals:

Knowledge takes two forms: it is either intuitive knowledge or logical knowledge; knowledge obtained by means of our power to create mental representations, or knowledge obtained by means of the intellect; knowledge of individuals, or knowledge of universals; of particular things, or of the relationships between them; it is, in short, either that which produces representations or that which produces concepts. (Croce, *Aesthetic* 1)

This is the arena Croce's aesthetics will traverse, as he proceeds to tease out the structural implications of this rather uneasy division, which seems to call implicitly for a moment of recognition denied to it. We can immediately see some of the difficulties that will arise. For example, though the intuition is the only creative ground of representation and therefore retains a structuring agency, can it really be said to have a knowable "content"? Croce seems unsure about the "eyes" of his intuitive base:

For what on earth *could* intuitive knowledge be without the light of the intellect? It would be a servant without a master; and if the master needs the servant, the former is even more necessary to the latter, if he is to get by in life. Intuition is blind: the intellect lends its eyes to it. (1-2)

Now the first point to fix firmly in one's mind is that intuitive knowledge has no need of masters; it has no need to lean on anyone; it does not have to ask for the loan of anyone else's eyes since it has perfectly adequate eyes in its own head. (2)

It is a fine line that Croce walks as he must convey the primacy and perceptive immediacy (whether real or unreal) of his intuition, without

tipping over into a structuration that tests intuition with the weight of concept. In this first of our points of comparison with Stevens, we come to see how Croce is engaged in a writing of evasion and resistance, focused on the conceptual negation of intuition. This technique is perhaps presented most explicitly in “The Auroras of Autumn,” with the stylized cancellation in cantos II, III, and IV of previous complexes of images: “Farewell to an idea . . .” (CP 412–14).

From Croce’s central distinction follows the stream of dialectical oppositions that result, finally, in a pure intuition, an immanency that redeems all the lower levels into necessity:

All the forms of the spirit are necessary, and the higher is so only because there is the lower, and the lower is as much to be despised or less to be valued to the same extent as the first step of a stair is despicable, or of less value in respect to the topmost step. (“Pure Intuition” 384)

This redemption of the “coarser” aesthetics—the empirical, the utilitarian, the intellectualist, the agnostic, and the mystic, in ascending and unchangeable order—is a later amendment to the system, but an important one, for it frees up and attempts to justify the truth-giving character of the final stage of pure intuition:

But the attempt to close a mental process in an arbitrary manner is vain, and of necessity causes remorse and self-criticism. Thus it comes about, that each one of those unilateral and erroneous doctrines continually tends to surpass itself and to enter the stage which follows it. (377)

So, for example, the empiricist in distinguishing what is empirical formulates a theoretical concept, thereby surpassing his empiricism. Each doctrine that falls short of pure intuition, though it lives “amid contradictions and in anguish” (378), contains the seed of pure intuition within it. In this way poetry’s representation frees itself of any determined end or concept, and expression is cast as an absolute event:

Art is governed entirely by imagination; its only riches are images. Art does not classify objects, nor pronounce them real or imaginary, nor qualify them, nor define them. Art feels and represents them. Nothing more. Art therefore is *intuition*, in so far as it is a mode of knowledge, not abstract, but concrete, and in so far as it uses the real, without changing or falsifying it. In so far as it apprehends it immediately, before it is modified and made clear by the concept, it must be called *pure intuition*. (385)

Croce is careful to insist that intuition is identical neither to perception nor sensation, as both are seen to require limiting concepts: "Intuition embraces, without distinction, both the perception of what is real, and the representation of what is simply possible" (*Aesthetic* 4).

The idea that follows from this, one we might call Croce's central doctrine in relation to poetry, is the doctrine of the identity of intuition and expression. This identity initially arises in *Aesthetic* as a way of avoiding a wholly associationist psychology that insists on the formlessness of sensation and the implicit untruth (as Croce argues) that intuition is one-way negation, comparable with the "brute" arrival of sensory information. Croce rebuts this by advocating the "spiritual activity" of intuition, while still holding fast to its structural implications as non-conceptual knowledge; and to do so he must also insist on the said identity:

Everything that is truly intuition or representation is also expression. That which is not brought before the mind as an object by expression is not intuition or representation, but sensation or something merely natural. The spirit only intuits by making, forming, expressing. Anyone who separates intuition from expression will never be able to put them together again. (*Aesthetic* 8-9)

Independent from and autonomous with respect to the intellectual; indifferent to any distinctions we subsequently make between the real and the unreal, and to any subsequently formulated awareness of space and time;—an intuition or representation is to be distinguished from that which feels and endures, from the flood and flux of sensation, from psychic material, as *form*; and this form, this taking possession, is expression. To intuit is to express; and nothing else (nothing more, but nothing less) than to express. (11)

Relations with Stevens' practice begin to come into sharper focus. We can see how Croce must save his intuition from conceptual or "intellectual" encroachment in order to assert its primacy in a knowledge of spirit; yet also bind this inseparably to its form, its knowable part, which seems to be a more than intellectualist form, because it has been filtered through intuition, and thereby cleansed of a prior "universality" that it originally had no right to claim. This "priorsness" of the value-term is also an important aspect of Stevens' work, particularly when the style is seen to structure itself around a prior negation, an implicit recognition of just the "firstness" that is the intuition's role. "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" begins with an attempt to articulate in denial of conceptual encroachment, resistant to metaphor:

The eye's plain version is a thing apart,  
The vulgate of experience. Of this,  
A few words, an and yet, and yet, and yet— (CP 465)

The vulgate is the common language Stevens strives for in this poem, the surrogate stylistic counterpart of the “ordinary.” But the “few words” resist making any conceptual statement, enacting instead a gesture of deferment, where the series “and yet” holds off competing assertions.

The irresistible alteration of the first line to read “a thing, a part” is left wide open by the line’s rhythm, and we are located firmly in the visual sense that for Stevens is always the primary sense, that from which these particular/universal relations are most often abstracted. In fact, the whole poem has no anxiety about this location, the aesthetic of the situated gaze allowing the objects of sight—“These houses, these difficult objects, dilapidate / Appearances of what appearances” (CP 465)—to be displayed as if inherent in a conscious methodology and certainty of approach, while still the formal question of their universal discovery remains vexed. The scene has been, *a priori*, dedicated to the creative act. We see how Croce’s repudiation of “meanings” in favor of the self-identity of expression is embraced by Stevens: “Words, lines, not meanings, not communications, / Dark things without a double” (CP 465). Any secondary motive that releases the pressure of this prior dedication is suppressed, until this gesture of intuition becomes the nominal guarantee of the poem’s self-identity.

### III

So it comes to appear that for Croce and Stevens it is a conscious and deliberate cessation of competing representations, in favor of a liminal meditation upon the impossibility of distinguishing intuition and expression as experience, that generates the poem. This ambition is explicit in Croce’s 1933 lecture:

Pure poetry, in the pure sense of the term, is certainly “sounds,” and certainly it is not sounds which have a logical meaning like the sounds of prose. . . . But to say it has no logical meaning is not to say it is a mere physical sound without a soul, an embodied soul which is one with its body as that is with it. In order to distinguish the soul of truth in poetry from the soul of truth in prose, aesthetic science has borrowed and employs the word “intuition,” and asserts that poetic intuition and poetic expression are brought forth at a single birth. (*Defence* 22)

The echoes of Stevens in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” lecture are strong here, long meditation seeming to have led both men to startlingly similar conclusions. There is a repeated insistence from both that the concept is an evasion of a base state of pure intuitive knowledge

of the world, often appearing as an “emptying” or “firstness.” A good example of this is Stevens’ “Poem Written at Morning,” where the experience comes to exceed the senses and results in a final image whose “expression” seems to resist any determination but that of its own steadfast certainty and suppresses any causal connection with the preceding lines:

The truth must be  
That you do not see, you experience, you feel,  
That the buxom eye brings merely its element  
To the total thing, a shapeless giant forced  
Upward.

Green were the curls upon that head. (*CP* 219)

Here we find again the apparent indifference and autonomy of his “total thing,” and only then a later commitment to the entanglements of its loss. Croce too insists on this, for how else is intuition to be “pure”: “It is altogether indifferent to Aesthetic whether the artist have had only an aspiration, or have realized that aspiration in his empirical life” (“Pure Intuition” 400).

We begin to recognize the nostalgic ground of these similarities, that ground of inability that Stevens stalks; the redemption of states of false conceptual orientation that aim to gratify desire, the need to enjoin, at the point of purest intuitive firstness, its necessary form as expression, yet also the retention of the crucial sense of indifference or autonomy.

We also note how Croce can support the claims of compositional resistance we observed earlier:

Poetry, on the contrary, ties the particular to the universal. . . . Like every other form of the spirit, poetry realizes itself only through the inner struggle of the spirit, that is, through the struggle against feeling which, while providing the poetic matter, imposes at the same time the resistance and the obstacle of matter. Thus, the victory by which the reluctant matter is transformed into images is marked by a serenity in which the emotion still trembles like a tear lighted by a smile, and by a new and appeased feeling which is the joy of beauty. (*Poetry and Literature* 15–16)

In “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” Stevens seems to enact this struggle:

In the perpetual reference, object  
Of the perpetual meditation, point  
Of the enduring, visionary love,

Obscure, in colors whether of the sun  
Or mind, uncertain in the clearest bells,  
The spirit's speeches, the indefinite,

Confused illuminations and sonorities,  
So much ourselves, we cannot tell apart  
The idea and the bearer-being of the idea. (CP 466)

It will be clearer now, I hope, how my discussion of Croce might illuminate a Stevens text. In the extract above, the "perpetual reference" seems to refer to the body's constant assailing by a Crocean "matter," yet these oncoming particularities are equally the form that may appease the desire for "enduring, visionary love." The mind begins to work at the division—"obscure," "uncertain," and "confused" signifying sharply on the level of their turbulence—by attempting to apply a test of sufficiency to conceptual frames that must perpetually fall away, as they are given as primary, not "redeemed" by the intuition. Thus the implication that we become "so much ourselves" only by returning to pure intuition, the identity of intuition and expression, or the triumph of form's pressure upon matter. Where we "cannot tell apart" the idea and its form, there can be "no causal connection between theories of poetry and poetic creation."

We have already discussed the identity of intuition and expression in *The Aesthetic as the Science of Expression and of the Linguistic in General*. This identity is refined by Croce in "Pure Intuition and the Lyrical Character of Art":

Suffice it to say, as regards the former [intuition], that he alone who divides the unity of spirit into soul and body can have faith in a pure act of the soul, and therefore in an intuition, which should exist as an intuition, and yet be without its body, expression. Expression is the actuality of intuition, as action is of will[.] (386)

So expression is of the one substance with intuition, but different in appearance. From this identity, that is, from its principal ground, it is not difficult to see how Croce becomes interested less in language's "abstraction and in grammatical detail" than in its "immediate reality, and in all its manifestations, spoken and sung, phonic and graphic" (387). That is, language's positive semantic work will always surpass apophatic work; there is always a knowledge in language that exceeds that which is produced by statements of negation. In other words, there is always for Croce an aspect of language use that is expressive and nothing but expressive. Again, the scheme is that from negation arises a positive knowledge. Croce also argues that from such a point of view, pure intuition can never be submitted to a dialectic itself and therefore be surpassed.

The transparency and finality of Croce's "pure intuition" as expression is also found in Stevens' poem:

Suppose these houses are composed of ourselves,  
So that they become an impalpable town, full of  
Impalpable bells, transparencies of sound,

Sounding in transparent dwellings of the self. . . .  
(CP 466)

To "suppose" is Stevens' early test of an interior concept rather than its fully committed assertion. It enacts the ways in which the difficult objects change and orientate toward that concept, as the exterior world is so often seen to do in his work. This testing brings the above section to the image of negation and absorption we recognize from previous discussion, where "the idea" and "the bearer-being of the idea" cannot be separated, but nevertheless seem habitual in association. These lines aim for a rejection of the palpable concept or frame in favor of wholly exchangeable identities.

The resistance of dialectics in Croce and Stevens, where the poetic ambition is affirmed by a total condition rather than the orientations of asserted concepts, is that which draws them to lyricism as the necessary character of true art. Pure intuition cannot be submitted to a dialectical process, Croce writes, because that act would be "cold," while the truth of this purity is such that it cannot be attended by indifference and emotional distance on the part of the subject:

What pleases and what is sought in art, what makes beat the heart and enraptures the admiration, is life, movement, emotion, warmth, the feeling of the artist. This alone affords the supreme criterion for distinguishing true from false works of art, those with insight from the failures. (388–89)

Such "warmth" is inextricably linked with a sense of "coherence," where a single personality binds its elements. We may feel Croce's disappointment with much of the poetry he must have encountered early in the century, when he designates as failures works "in which no single personality appears, but a number of disaggregated and jostling personalities, that is, really, none" (389). Yet he also disposes of the argument that impersonality is the characteristic of the modern in art: "The theory of impersonality really coincides with that of personality in every point" (390). Impersonality is merely the name given to that endeavor to halt the invasion of "the volitional" over "the ideal."

This is the route that Croce takes toward his assertion of art's lyrical character: "If (to quote the celebrated words in our own way) the *classic*

moment of perfect representation or expression be necessary for the work of art, the *romantic* moment of feeling is not less necessary" (391). Feeling is content, intuition is form, and the two are inseparable, might be the briefest summation of Croce's position. Thus, art comes to appear as the sum of two values. "But if we start with the *distinction*, we can never again reach *unity*" (393). The intellection required to handle these devolved concepts is fundamentally incapable of the required unity. Here Croce sounds more and more like Stevens: "The artist does not make the gods, because he has other things to do" (393).

So we have a clearer idea of Croce's theory of lyrical intuition. Lyrical expression is grounded in the originary firstness of intuition, and is thus prior to all other knowledge or faculty of knowledge. Yet this is no "brute sensation," no utterly discrete or unavailable moment of the soul, but is instantaneously the lyrical expression, a state of the soul in effigy. The lyrical warmth is the only test of this art because it is its recognizable aspect. Art itself is utterly protected from the trials of its empirical existence: "Art does not allow itself to be troubled with the abstractions of the intellect, and therefore does not make mistakes; but it does not know that it does not make mistakes" (401). Finally, art cannot achieve anything other than a "dreamlike" status, for the concept brings it awake. The lyrical intuition is nevertheless homage to the concrete, for in its dreamlike passing, the spirit has been glimpsed from within its marking.

#### IV

At this point I would like to focus the foregoing issues more directly upon "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" and explore the poem's modulations of Croce's "lyrical intuition." I will want to return to Croce later to draw some conclusions about just how much Stevens owes to Croce in this regard and how far he strays from the Italian philosopher's rather strict separation of terms.

Section III of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" begins with the assertion that "The point of vision and desire are the same" (CP 466). We discover here a certain parallel to that warmth of feeling or desire that *must* express itself lyrically for Croce. That is, it is impossible to simply attempt the "larger poem" of "enduring, visionary love" as a categorical exercise, as if concept and differentiation could come to a cessation of the dialectic. It seems to be a muscle of recognition that Stevens insists upon here, the form of feeling that is seen to oblige meditation with its counterpart, vision. Section III deals with this crucial "force," whose truth is always sanctioned by its indeterminacy, and thus its identity with the sought-for subject:

Say next to holiness is the will thereto,  
And next to love is the desire for love,  
The desire for its celestial ease in the heart,

Which nothing can frustrate, that most secure,  
Unlike love in possession of that which was  
To be possessed and is. But this cannot

Possess. It is desire, set deep in the eye,  
Behind all actual seeing, in the actual scene. . . . (CP 467)

The doctrinal tone of this section, and the explicitly rhetorical defense against conceptual encroachment displayed by “most secure,” cannot entirely remove Stevens’ sense that desire fails love and comes to be marked as the nominal name for continuation, or of the obligation to go on. Desire is the recognition of this, that which warns and mitigates against an inadequate cessation, whose warmth exposes what is cold. So Stevens personifies his own negated principle of sufficiency, and the work of this principle, its refining and resistant role, appears as a character in his drama of the ordinary. By such formal means, the evasiveness of the subject is intensified.

The difficulty for Stevens in this regard is that the “plainness” of the ordinary evening seems to be incompatible with the indeterminacy of the subject:

Plain men in plain towns  
Are not precise about the appeasement they need.

They only know a savage assuagement cries  
With a savage voice. . . . (CP 467)

This savagery is the savagery of that which cannot be held in concept and be therefore possessed, the personification of its turbulence. Again, at this point of failure it is pure sound that is desired for compositional equivalency:

and in that cry they hear  
Themselves transposed, muted and comforted

In a savage and subtle and simple harmony,  
A matching and mating of surprised accords,  
A responding to a diviner opposite. (CP 467–68)

Stevens again pushes language into a space where it is marked by its trespass, where a cumulative piling up of adjectival and verbal surrogates aim to absorb the indeterminate lyrically; and where the determined presurizing of this failure point seeks to instigate the subject as that which has drawn temporary equivalences from its own substance.

So "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" might be described as a coloring-in of the myriad aspects of an indeterminate good, which formally adheres to the apparent principles it discloses. For Croce, as we have seen, all the desires of spirit come to be reconciled by the priority of pure intuition, the vision of the undivided self with no distinction between the forces of feeling and the templates of form. And as his explicit province here is the ordinary, we see Stevens also coming upon this firstness, a version of innocence and intuition:

Reality is the beginning not the end,  
Naked Alpha, not the hierophant Omega,  
Of dense investiture, with luminous vassals. (CP 469)

We are strongly reminded of Croce's description of art as "simple, nude and poor." Where Alpha is an original firstness, Omega represents the "polymathic" spillages of concept, culture, and wholesale overdetermination. Though we have seen how Stevens is often at great pains to reconcile these aspects, he is much more explicit here in his corollary of Croce's intuition. The difference is collated in the possibility of an adequate cessation—"in the end and the way / To the end" (CP 469)—yet in the absence of this, life comes to be "refreshed" as "Alpha continues to begin" (CP 469). We see how close the image of a continuous beginning is to the idea of the identity of intuition and expression. The intuition in its empirical and evasive existence can be rescued by a permanent becoming, the first ground of all its representative offspring.

For Stevens, in this sense, it can never be an adequate step on his search to simply credit the empirical concept without negation through the Alpha:

It is as if  
Men turning into things, as comedy,  
Stood, dressed in antic symbols, to display  
  
The truth about themselves, having lost, as things,  
That power to conceal they had as men,  
Not merely as to depth but as to height  
  
As well, not merely as to the commonplace  
But, also, as to their miraculous,  
Conceptions of new mornings of new worlds. . . .  
(CP 470)

Yet since the cure of this blank fact is resort to its double, the negation that draws it back to itself, the radical indeterminacy of the subject then becomes merely an ebbing of results:

The enigmatical  
Beauty of each beautiful enigma

Becomes amassed in a total double-thing.  
We do not know what is real and what is not. (*CP* 472)

Section XVII elaborates on this apparent stagnation: "It comes to the point and at the point, / It fails" (*CP* 477). The familiar incompatibility of the thought and its "other" is evoked, yet this time the meditation holds more firmly to its accommodation: "The strength at the centre is serious" (*CP* 477).

The image of failure is rejected in this same section, and when it is, when the absolute incompatibility is held to be an action, we again notice the poetry begins to signify as an image of complexity that admits both the perception of failure and its achievement of representation:

Perhaps instead of failing it rejects  
As a serious strength rejects pin-idleness.  
A blank underlies the trials of device,

The dominant blank, the unapproachable.  
This is the mirror of the high serious:  
Blue verdured into a damask's lofty symbol,

Gold easings and ounceings and fluctuations of thread  
And beetling of belts and lights of general stones,  
Like blessed beams from out a blessed bush

Or the wasted figurations of the wastes  
Of night, time and the imagination. . . . (*CP* 477)

In this passage, a formal consolation is tentatively drawn from the interest and vividness of the search for a subject. The "serious strength" begins to be less daunted by its mission, and form turns inwards to a festival of its effects, where even "waste" on a cosmic scale is partially reclaimed by the meaningful, lyric act of naming it, the grasping of the image at the point of failure.

We must be careful, however, in formulating the parameters by which we set our sense of lyric here. "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" utilizes both the syntactical exactness that aims to capture and hold precise abstractions—"At the exactest point at which it is itself, / Transfixing by being purely what it is" (*CP* 471)—and the richness of imagery and rhythm that assures us that this poem issues from a single voice that upholds a sense of its own coherence:

Inescapable romance, inescapable choice  
Of dreams, disillusion as the last illusion,  
Reality as a thing seen by the mind,  
Not that which is but that which is apprehended,  
A mirror, a lake of reflections in a room,  
A glassy ocean lying at the door. . . . (CP 468)

So the “lyrical” here manifest in blank verse is not merely a “container” restrictive enough to encourage rhythmic concentration and “loose” enough for this desirable choice of romantic colorations of ideas, in order to sharpen their sensory particularity. It is also crucial to recognize that the lyrical style as a formal meditation also serves to consecrate the poetic space even as it fills it. The lyric, in its manifestation of a “sanctioned speech,” must be permanently concerned with rising to adequacy with the free space of rhythms and tones it claims for itself. This is akin to saying, more crudely, that the lyric poet of meditative form challenges himself to provide a certain robustness of “content.” Stevens’ intense abstraction at points of culmination in meditative flights is as much a function of this consecration and ritualizing of the poetic act via form, as of a compelling final vision arising wholly from the rhetorical substance.

The point where “vision and desire are the same” is the recognition of this consecration, in which form has expanded with the apparent necessity of its new speech, yet conversely, where this distinct and even somewhat artificial tone equally defines the parameters of the form. The purely intuitive comes to stand as a fitting model to embrace that representation of experience in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” that might be called expressive, and nothing but expressive:

The dry eucalyptus seeks god in the rainy cloud.  
Professor Eucalyptus of New Haven seeks him  
In New Haven with an eye that does not look

Beyond the object. He sits in his room, beside  
The window, close to the ramshackle spout in which  
The rain falls with a ramshackle sound. He seeks

God in the object itself, without much choice.  
It is a choice of the commodious adjective  
For what he sees, it comes in the end to that:

The description that makes it divinity, still speech  
As it touches the point of reverberation—not grim  
Reality but reality grimly seen

And spoken in paradisal parlance new. . . . (CP 475)

In this new discovery of the ordinary that strengthened him toward his long poem, Stevens seeks a contact that outlines the purely expressive, the “ramshackle sound” that will exceed and ground his contacts. Here, the state of consecrated lyric is folded back upon itself as the poem delays its choice from within the very act of choosing, a solemn exhaustion. The falling rain continues to inspire the next section, where the dedication of the ordinary is translated into a lyric deftness, the object dedicated all its avenues of approach:

The hibernal dark that hung  
In primavera, the shadow of bare rock,  
  
Becomes the rock of autumn, glittering,  
Ponderable source of each imponderable,  
The weight we lift with the finger of a dream,  
  
The heaviness we lighten by light will,  
By the hand of desire, faint, sensitive, the soft  
Touch and trouble of the touch of the actual hand.  
(CP 476)

Stevens’ focusing upon the ways in which a certain poetic style and language use may inform contextual orientation leads us to a related point of compositional interest. When a lyric poem is seen to set aside, ritualize, and give care to certain distinct and estranged tones, we come to recognize that, far from a form that is the naturalized image of an indeterminate “intention,” the poem’s style is motivated by a submission or surrender to the control of certain sites of necessary posture. It may be that the poverty of those readings of Stevens in which his language is seen to produce only an endless linguistic play is a consequence of their failure to attend to the contextual pressures or postures that are finally irreducible to the language that produced them.

At the point of contact, the aggregation of impulses to the written mark, their knowable connection seems to fail, even as their unknown union is again asserted negatively, as in this section, quoted in full:

But he may not. He may not evade his will,  
Nor the wills of other men; and he cannot evade  
The will of necessity, the will of wills—  
  
Romanza out of the black shepherd’s isle,  
Like the constant sound of the water of the sea  
In the hearing of the shepherd and his black forms;

Out of the isle, but not of any isle.  
Close to the senses there lies another isle  
And there the senses give and nothing take,

The opposite of Cythère, an isolation  
At the centre, the object of the will, this place,  
The things around—the alternate romanza

Out of the surfaces, the windows, the walls,  
The bricks grown brittle in time's poverty,  
The clear. A celestial mode is paramount,

If only in the branches sweeping in the rain:  
The two romanzas, the distant and the near,  
Are a single voice in the boo-ha of the wind.

(CP 480–81)

Stevens cannot hold to the vision of an isolated, self-sufficient will of wills, an absolute "island" estrangement from the body of consciousness. Instead of division at the point of failure, the lyric gathers and harvests its own autonomous achievements as part of the acceptance of what is ordinary and near at hand. "The object of the will" hails the return to ground that is this poem's compelling motive and speech, where the isolation of this distinct speech, this apparent removal of distinct dialect, is reconciled to its place as "romanza," the will to self-identity that is the search for the subject. Now, the "celestial mode" tentatively sought by Crispin has reached a further stage of its formal accommodation. A direct distinctiveness, and the resolution of the distant, universal axis and the ordinary that Stevens had struggled to achieve in the earlier poem, are accommodated here; not by a frozen image of the possible, but by the dynamic image of "single voice." The question posed "To the Roaring Wind" at the end of *Harmonium*—"What syllable are you seeking, / Vocalissimus, / In the distances of sleep? / Speak it" (CP 113)—has discovered one temporary answer. It speaks of the achievement of a lyricism of self-identity that, although its inability was once a strain on Stevens' work, here provides the model of lyric striving.

"An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" is distinctly concerned, then, with the achievement of lyrical form, not its inevitable failures, though these are implicated by the negation of the empirical and its return. Section XXIV, for example, deals directly with the opening of lyric voice among the adjacent:

It took all day to quieten the sky  
And then to refill its emptiness again,

So that at the edge of afternoon, not over,  
Before the thought of evening had occurred  
Or the sound of *Incomincia* had been set,

There was a clearing, a readiness for first bells,  
An opening for outpouring, the hand was raised:  
There was a willingness not yet composed,

A knowing that something certain had been  
proposed. . . . (CP 482)

The quietening of the sky through the negation of its immediate visual effects returns to that scene its myriad expression held in tension. The poet pauses here at the point that motivates a consecration of lyric space, in the hope of the fulfillment of "willingness," or at least its metaphorical capture. But the attempt to capture this point, the identity of intuition and expression, must fail and by necessity be dominated by the orientations required to "voice" it. Yet in this movement and hesitation, the point has been tentatively marked as a possession of the poem, not something beyond it.

Thus the poem celebrates its status as "a coming on and a coming forth" (CP 487), a "visibility of thought" (CP 488) where what is desired and seen seem to come together. The will to call this "unity" or "union" is strong in the poem, but Stevens resists it, almost successfully. Instead, what he writes is a lyric about "the edgings and inchings of final form" (CP 488), where the consecration of the poem is turned against itself at every point and only in this way drawn to the assertion of its right to assert:

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

Finally, the "premise" of any absorption of the real is inadequate, and its framing occupation must bow to the relentless refinement of the dictates of pure poetry. Yet the resistance to determination or stagnation at the poem's end leaves us with an image of its negations as a principle of the search for a subject.

How, then, can we come to say what is revealed by the aesthetic composition of Stevens' work here? First, it should be recognized that our discussion has taken part in a long-standing debate concerning the relation of technique to the aesthetic, an arena that Croce termed the "activity of externalization." His wording reveals that like Stevens, Croce regards the poem as a possible outcome of aesthetic experience, where despite the utter dislocation of will from the intuition necessary for it to have come

into existence, a volitional externalizing nevertheless draws the poet into the fluid realm of techniques:

We cannot will or not will our aesthetic vision: we can, however, will or not will to externalize it, or better, to preserve and communicate, or not, to others, the externalization produced. (*Aesthetic* 182)

Thus we talk of an artistic technique in the same metaphorical and elliptic manner that we talk of the physically beautiful, that is to say (in more precise language), *knowledge employed by the practical activity engaged in producing stimuli to aesthetic reproduction*. (183; emphasis in the original)

This is surely fitting context for Stevens, whose “techniques,” as we have seen, are worked out even as the poem is continuing, even to the extent that this reproduction becomes an explicit theme.

For Croce, the activity of externalization is separable from the pure intuition only in order to describe it, and it is at this point that his sharpest critics (including Santayana) have reached the end of their patience with a schema that appears repeatedly apologist. Stevens certainly avoids a culminant rejoicing and finds only a dead end in the strict theoretical pursuit of purity. Yet neither is his aesthetic wholly satisfied by the trials of technique, however refined. As with Croce, in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” the practical, volitional, and technical activity of composition can never produce the illumination that is desired. Rather, Croce’s strict separating out of these entities is accomplished more relaxedly by Stevens as a dialectical testing of sufficient expression, in which only a first ground of intuition can properly affirm the decisions of composition.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>“The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” was first published in Allen Tate’s series anthology *The Language of Poetry*. Measures Series in Literary Criticism. Princeton, 1942.

<sup>2</sup>Croce’s writing on the aesthetic has been subject to gross distortion in being translated into English. The worst culprit in this was Douglas Ainslie, unfortunately also the translator responsible for introducing Croce to the English-reading world. Ainslie’s first translation of *Aesthetic as Science of Expression and General Linguistic* in 1909 is probably most notorious for its confusion of *fantasia* as “fancy,” rather than a creative faculty, closer to the more familiar senses of “imagination.”

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## “A New Girl in a New Season”: Stevens, Poggioli, and the Making of *Mattino domenicale*

MASSIMO BACIGALUPO

**M**ATTINO DOMENICALE ED ALTRE POESIE (1954) was the only volume of Wallace Stevens' poetry to appear in another language during the poet's lifetime, and it may still be unequalled for its editorial as well as critical quality, the more so since it offers in the endnotes Stevens' own invaluable comments written for his admiring translator, Renato Poggioli. Poggioli was a brilliant scholar of Russian and comparative literature, author (among other volumes) of *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* and of a massive Italian anthology of Russian poetry, *Il fiore del verso russo*. He was, in addition, an impassioned translator, as is shown by his verse renderings from the Russian, which are often in rhyme. In one of his letters to Stevens he mentions that he has also translated Novalis, Rilke, Guillén, Valéry, and Saint-John Perse.<sup>1</sup>

Born in Florence in 1907, Poggioli grew up in the city's thriving intellectual milieu and published articles and translations in *Solaria*, a major literary magazine with international ambitions (1930–34). During those early years he also spent periods as a lecturer in Prague, Warsaw, and Vilnius. When in 1938 Italy introduced racial legislation, he left the country with his wife, to teach first at Smith and Brown, then at Harvard. (He served in the U.S. army during the war and was naturalized in 1950.) One typical course he gave at Harvard, “Romantic Poetics,” offered a reading of major documents of romantic theory (de Staël, Chateaubriand, Sismondi, Stendhal, Hugo, the Schlegels, Wordsworth, Manzoni, Pushkin). Poggioli died in 1963, aged 56, in a car accident in California. This was a major loss, for his work is consistently first rate.<sup>2</sup>

His epistolary relation with Wallace Stevens was an important one, as readers of the *Letters* know, because of the comments that he elicited from the Hartford poet. Poggioli's side of the correspondence fills in the picture, telling us something of the person to whom Stevens responded and making us appreciate this unique moment in the history of Stevens' international reception. It was owing to the curiosity and poetic intelligence of Poggioli that Stevens had the pleasure of seeing a book of his verse el-

egantly published in a foreign language. This language, curiously, was not French, with which he had conducted such a long-standing affair, but rather clear-voweled Italian—an appropriate tongue, one would imagine, for the deceptive clarity that is one of the chief characteristics of Stevens' diction and for the sounds of his Blue Guitar.<sup>3</sup>

On 11 February 1947, Stevens delivered his Harvard lecture "Three Academic Pieces," which included the poems "Someone Puts a Pineapple Together" and "Of Ideal Time and Choice," the former very likely inspired by a watercolor of pineapples sent him by José Rodríguez Feo in 1945 (*L* 483). The lecture was the beginning of another momentous correspondence. Poggioli first wrote "Dear Mr. Stephens" on 13 February 1947, in long-hand on Harvard stationery:

as an admirer of your poetry, I enjoyed very much your Harvard reading of a few days ago. As the editor of an Italian and international literary magazine, *Inventario* (of which I am sending you a copy under separate cover), I take the liberty of asking you whether you would grant permission to publish some translations from your work. As you shall see, we publish also unpublished work in the original tongue by foreign authors: is it too much to ask you also for a small contribution of this kind?

Respectfully yours,  
Renato Poggioli  
Professor, Brown University  
Visiting Lecturer, Harvard University<sup>4</sup>

Poggioli's rather perfunctory invitation to contribute did not lead to anything, although Stevens answered the letter on 17 February, showing how responsive he was even to routine inquiries, and Poggioli, still addressing him as "Mr Stephens," wrote back on 24 February 1947: "I am very grateful for your kind promise of thinking of *Inventario* when you have something new. We shall be proud to publish it." He added: "Allow me to express again my feeling of admiration for your poetic work." So Poggioli's interest was not just a matter of soliciting contributions. He had a special liking for Stevens. There the matter rested, however, until Poggioli got off on a new start three years later, on 24 January 1950, when he wrote from the Harvard Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures:

Dear Mr. Stevens:

I am Renato Poggioli, born in Italy, and professor of Slavic and Comparative Literature at Harvard University. I am also foreign editor of *Inventario*, a "little magazine," with some international circulation, published in Milan, Italy.

I have just taken the liberty of translating into Italian your wonderful poem, Sunday Morning. The translation is metrical, and counts the same number of lines as the original. Whether or not I flatter myself, I feel that it is not too unworthy of the original. I enclose herewith a copy of my translation, and will very much appreciate any observation or criticism you may care to make.

I would like to publish this translation in one of the next issues of Inventario, and later, to include it in a collection of my verse translations . . . to be published soon, in a limited, and non-profit edition. . . .

Inventario will also publish soon a special issue completely devoted to American letters. The selection has been made with the help of Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, F. O. Matthiessen, Archibald McLeish, Harry Levin, and others. We would like to translate a few of your poems, and, if you can give to us something of this kind, also a few new lines, to be published into English, and never printed before. Am I asking too much?

Please accept the sincere expression of my deep admiration and gratitude.

Yours truly,  
Renato Poggioli<sup>5</sup>

Stevens again responded warmly and promptly to this courteous letter and the enclosed translation, instructing Poggioli about writing for permission to Knopf and promising a new poem for *Inventario*:

I have nothing that I can send you now. Since I have been ill recently, I am full of the stuffiness that goes with being indoors for several weeks. If you could wait until April or May, I think I could promise to send you something by then and certainly I should be delighted to do so if possible.<sup>6</sup>

Concerning Poggioli's translation, Stevens made the first of many disclaimers of any competence to comment. Although he certainly was comfortable with French, he could probably understand only the general sense of Italian and Spanish, not their nuances:

While I feel the cadences of Sunday Morning in the translation, or, rather, similar cadences, I am not able to comment on the translation because I know nothing whatever about Italian.<sup>7</sup>

However noncommittal, the response was encouraging. When he received the published translation, Stevens observed in a similar vein: "I have read

your translation again, this time out loud and, like Tasso reading Greek, I enjoyed the sound, if nothing more."<sup>8</sup>

Poggioli's translation, "Mattino domenicale," is written in strict hendecasyllabics, which are to Italian verse what iambic pentameters are to English. But since Italian words are usually longer than English words, a translator who wishes to keep to the strict meter must either use more lines or skip some words. Poggioli chose to do the latter, actually sacrificing very little except for some articles one would normally expect in colloquial Italian. Thus the opening reads:

Lusinghe di vestaglia, ad ora tarda  
Caffè ed arance sulla sedia al sole,  
La verde libertà d'un pappagallo,  
Su un tappeto si fondono a disperdere  
Silenzi d'un arcaico sacrificio.  
Essa sogna e risente il nero stupro  
Dell'antica rovina, quasi quiete  
Che fra lampade acquatiche s'abbuia.  
Le agre arance e le ali d'oro verde  
Sembran parte d'un funebre corteo  
Che striscia sopra l'acqua senza suono.  
Il giorno è come oceano senza suono,  
Cheto al passo dei suoi sognanti piedi,  
Volti oltremare verso Palestina,  
Muto regno del sangue e del sepolcro.  
(*Mattino domenicale* 23)

Perhaps because Stevens also uses quite a few polysyllables, Poggioli managed to cramp 96 words into 165 syllables, against Stevens' 102 in 150 syllables. Only five words he skipped, the ones I italicize: "*and* late coffee," "*holy* hush," "*she* dreams a little," "*that* old catastrophe," "*wide* water." Also, one would expect an article before "Silenzi" and "quiete" (as in the English original: "*The* holy hush," "*a* calm"), and this makes the Italian more terse and in general more obscure than Stevens' solemn yet easeful manner calls for (a fact that has a lot to do also with Poggioli's distinctly literary diction: "sacrificio," "s'abbuia," "cheto"). If we turn to the meaning, questions arise about "a calm" (where Stevens seems to intend "absence of wind" rather than the more general "quiet" of Poggioli's reading), "bright, green wings," which are rendered rather freely as "ali d'oro verde" (wings of green gold), and "wide water," rendered first as "acqua" then as "oceano," thus suggesting the wideness but not the beauty of Stevens' repetition in lines 11–12. Given the difficult task he set himself, Poggioli did well, and produced in this case a version both sufficiently literal and poetic. The result is not Stevens as we perceive him today, but as he appeared to a sophisticated European poetry reader of 1950. The problem

resides partly in the hendecasyllabics, which to Italian ears sound more stilted than blank verse does to modern speakers of English. A later translator would probably avoid the strict verse and allow the line more elbow-room, even if that means it becomes a little longer. This is what I did in 1994 (*Harmonium* 92), though I realize that by not following any strict norm one risks providing little more than a word-for-word paraphrase. In this respect, Poggioli does better. No reader would doubt that his “Mattino domenicale” is poetry—perhaps portentously so, though it only seldom falls into overly poetic diction.

In 1950, the Florentine pre-World War II poetic movement known as Ermetismo was still in its ascendancy, and in any case it was the style of Poggioli’s generation. It sought a symbolic poetry of implication and syntactic complexity and ambiguity. Poggioli’s “Mattino domenicale” is written in this style. For example, by omitting the article and adjective in “*The holy hush*” and adding the indeterminate article in “*un arcaico sacrificio*” (“*an ancient sacrifice*”), he obscures Stevens’ references to the religious functions associated with Sunday. In addition, “*that old catastrophe*” becomes “*l’antica rovina*” (“*the old catastrophe*”), and the Italian reader might well have wondered what this “ruin” is, had he not been educated to the notion that poetry is essentially incomprehensible.

True to his word, Stevens in May 1950 sent Poggioli the new poem he had promised in January—nothing less than “The Rock.” Poggioli was suitably enthusiastic:

Dear Mr. Stevens:

I am writing you just after my first reading of THE ROCK. In spite of a long stay in this country, I do not dare to pronounce a judgment on a poem in English. Yet, in this case, allow me to express my enthusiasm. Please accept, with my own, the heartfelt thanks of the editor and publisher of INVENTARIO.

The current issue of INVENTARIO, which I shall receive in a few weeks, contains my translation of SUNDAY MORNING, with Cunningham’s commentary of the same poem (from the article recently published in “Poetry.”) The editor couldn’t wait for the American issue, and decided to publish that poem as soon as possible. . . .

I am sure that the editor will decide to include THE ROCK in the following issue, which will appear in about four or five months from now. It is INVENTARIO which feels obliged to you: you are at liberty to use THE ROCK when and how you wish, after its original appearance, without any acknowledgment to our periodical. I will take care that you receive on time the galley or page proofs. . . .<sup>9</sup>

Equally courteous, Stevens had sent the poem "with the understanding that I may include it in any future volume after it has appeared in INVENTARIO."<sup>10</sup> On 19 August 1950, Poggioli mailed Stevens the proofs from La Jolla, California, where he was vacationing. This prompted Stevens' comment, in the first letter to Poggioli included in Holly Stevens' edition, that, on rereading "The Rock," "The last part, which I had liked most, did not please me quite so well as the other parts" (L 690). But he added a characteristic flourish when he said that the poem's ideas "are not quite so well defined as objects seen in the air of Naples, but I think that they do very well."

*Inventario* could be truly happy to get first publication of one of Stevens' most tragic and inspiring meditations on the relation between the life of man and the life of the world, the Rock. A period of silence followed. Then, on 10 April 1953, Poggioli introduced himself a third and final time to the attention of the old master, very modestly suggesting that his name might have been forgotten by his correspondent:

Dear Mr. Stevens:

You cannot remember every admirer of your work, but you may remember me, at least as the Italian translator of your Sunday Morning. My Mattino Domenicale, and even more the original poems you gave Inventario and Botteghe Oscure, revealed your name to an elite of Italian readers, and aroused their desire to be better acquainted with your poetry. It has been suggested to me that I translate and publis[h] in a small volume a select choice of your poems: two or three long pieces, beginning with Sunday Morning, and ten or twelve brief lyrics. This small Italian anthology of your poetry could be entitled either POEMETTI E LIRICHE, or MATTINO DOMENICALE ED ALTRE POESIE. It ought to be preceded by a short critical notice; it could be enriched, if you wish to do so, by a brief statement by you about poetry, or about your own work; it could be finally crowned by a new, still unpublished, poem.

My frie[n]d Giulio Einaudi (the son of the President of the Italian Republic, and the best publisher in Italy) would be proud to include such a volume in a new splendid collection of foreign poets, which he had just started by issuing excellent Italian editions of Shakespeare's sonnets and of John Donne's poems. I take the liberty of sending you, under separate cover, a copy of one of these volumes, to give you an idea of the elegant dignity of Mr. Einaudi's publications. As you will see, this collection prints the original text alongside with each corresponding page of translation. . . .

In case you are interested, I will write you about this project in greater detail. I would make my suggestions, and ask for your counter-proposals, and for your advice. It would be a great privilege for me to be able to face again the rewarding challenge of your poetry. Translating is one of the humblest and noblest ways to understand poetry, not by recreating, but by being recreated by it.<sup>11</sup>

With this striking statement of the translator's rewards, the venture of *Mattino domenicale* was happily launched, for the pleasure of all concerned. The letters speak of a more august literary life than the one familiar to most of us half a century later. Invariably formal, they sparkle with innuendos and humor. Clearly in Poggioli Stevens had found a man of his own intellectual standing, whose maturity would never intrude upon his reserve, while at the same time feeding him with the discriminating appreciation that is one of the poet's rewards. After receiving and liking the Donne book (the cover white, the pages uncut), Stevens wrote Herbert Weinstock at Knopf that "A translation of this sort would interest me extremely, particularly considering the handsome form in which it would be published" (L 775)—always a book-lover's consideration. To Poggioli he said that the Donne volume, "a book of both elegance and dignity," would tempt him "to read Donne again whom I haven't read for fifty years" (L 775). He was also willing to provide a new poem, though not statements ("I don't like the idea of writing about my own work"). Poggioli "ought to be able to find something in *The Necessary Angel*," which had appeared in 1951. As already mentioned, the translator was to get around this by using in the commentary, verbatim, Stevens' own elucidations, with his permission. And we know how much these explications—together with those to Hi Simons and Ronald Lane Latimer—have come to form the basis for Stevens studies.

After Knopf and Einaudi came to an agreement, Poggioli sent Stevens (1 June 1953) a list of poems for inclusion and asked for comments. Stevens responded immediately that "The Comedian as the Letter C" could be too hard to translate (a way of suggesting perhaps his diminished appreciation of that early *tour de force*), and listed some of his favorites for Poggioli's consideration: "A Rabbit as King of the Ghosts," "Credences of Summer," and "Large Red Man Reading."<sup>12</sup> Poggioli was now at work, wanting to get the volume into shape before leaving for Italy in August. He turned to "Credences of Summer" and found it "a great poem" (8 June 1953). He asked about "half pales of red, / Half pales of green" (CP 378), and Stevens duly explicated, quoting Keats (L 781). On 22 June Poggioli wrote that he was now, "After some hesitation," turning his hand to "The Man with the Blue Guitar," and listed a number of queries:

- I. "A shearsman of sorts." Do you assign any special meaning to that noun?
- II[I]. What "his living hi and ho" are? Is "to tick it, tock it" a reference to the idea of tinkering with a watch?
- VIII. "And yet it brings the stone [*sic*] to bear": literal? colloquial?
- XI. "Hoo-ing the slick trombones": has "hoo-ing[""] any technical meaning?
- XIII. "Ay di mi": is this Spanish? Shouldn't it be "ay de mi"? What shall I be able to do with "The amorist Adjective aflame"?!?
- XIV. "One says: a German chandelier": a proverb?
- XV. "'hoard of destructions' ": a quotation? where from? Please kindly explain also "Catching at Good-Bye." Is "harvest moon" the "moon of harvest"? . . .
- XVIII. What's the meaning of the final "ex"? . . .
- XXIV. Is "hawk of life" to be translated literally?
- XXV. Kindly explain: "this-a-way," "that-a-way," "ai-yi-yi."
- XXVI. "a bar in space": in the sense of /sand-/bar?
- XXVIII. "Gesù": sic? Spanish, Jesus; Italian, Gesù.
- XXIX. "don": in the Spanish, in the academic, in the clerical sense?

Is there anything else I should know to do as well as I can my job as a translator of this strange, original, wonderful poem?<sup>13</sup>

Stevens generously and at length answered the questions by his painstaking translator, returning to his great poem nearly twenty years after the writing, and thus placing us all in his and Poggioli's debt. Poggioli's questions, in fact, could still be used as an appropriate test for any student or reader of Stevens. In his answer of 25 June 1953, Stevens also announced coolly: "I have now completed a short poem which I think will be suitable for the collection and expect to send it to you next week" (*L* 784).

This poem, sent as promised on 29 June (*L* 784), was "The River of Rivers in Connecticut." Acknowledging it from Cambridge on 30 June, Poggioli showed he could rise to the occasion: "I want to thank you for 'The River of Rivers in Connecticut,' of which I will merely say that it seems to be the poem of poems to me." Poggioli thus played on Stevens' use of the Hebrew superlative (e.g., King of Kings) to describe one of the poet's most moving statements of the very substance of universal life. An impassioned translator, he was also a discerning and responsive critic.

Meanwhile (28 June) Poggioli had thanked Stevens for his explications of "The Man with the Blue Guitar," and added: "With your permission, I shall use some of them in a series of glosses I am now compiling, and which will be placed at the end of the book." So *Mattino domenicale* was not only to be the first book by Stevens in another language, it also became the first annotated edition of some of his masterpieces and proved to be all the more fascinating for containing Stevens' comments in the original English. Thus readers of the Einaudi edition could benefit from information that not even Stevens' connoisseurs at home had access to. The volume, reissued by the same publisher in 1988<sup>14</sup> and in print at the date of this writing, is still indispensable because some of Stevens' comments are available only here, not having been reprinted in *Letters*. Here are some of them:

- III. *Man number one.*  
*"Man without variation. Man in C Major. The complete realization, of the idea of man. Man at his happier normal."*
- IV. *And all their manner in the thing.*  
*"The thing is a million people—everybody.<sup>15</sup> It is not possible to confine all the world (everybody) to reality. They will pick beyond that one string merely by picking it into something different."*
- VI. *A composing of the senses of the guitar.*  
*"I mean<sup>16</sup> an assembly of all possible senses: the totality of understanding."*
- XVII. *The person has a mould. But not - Its animal.*  
*"Anima = animal = soul. The body has a shape, the soul does not. The soul is the animal of the body. Art deceives itself in thinking that it can give final shape to the soul."*
- XXX. *His eye- A-cock at the cross piece on a pole.*  
*"man facing his particular job: in this case, an electric lineman." (Mattino domenicale 174–83)*

These and other important comments not reprinted in *Letters* were scrawled by Stevens on Poggioli's questionnaire of 4 July, and returned to him with the following letter in longhand:

Friday, July 10.

Dear Mr. Poggioli:

My secretary is on her vacation and I dislike having anything personal done by anyone else. The simplest way to reply to your questionnaire, under the circumstances, is to interline the answers. I made the notes last night in my big chair at home

and I do hope you can read the answers. If not, please let me know.

I see that I have overlooked part of your question about XXX, *passim*. A further commentary will follow, on Monday, which will also cover your memorandum of July 7. What I am sending, today, is what I have ready.

On the translation of *Il Fiume Dei Fiumi* I have noted a question. Also, as to line 3,

E ad alberi privi d'intelligenza arborea,

this refers to the distortion of trees not growing in conditions natural to them and not to houses deprived of a setting of trees. The look of death is the look of the deprivation of something vital. This translation is itself the work of a poet.

Always yours,  
Wallace Stevens<sup>17</sup>

Stevens is commenting here on the line "And trees that lack the intelligence of trees" (*CP* 533), his striking description of the landscape on the other side of death. It is noteworthy that a few years earlier the "intelligence" of trees had been the subject of an exchange between Ezra Pound and Stevens' mentor George Santayana.<sup>18</sup> But the poet Stevens is simply noting the absence that would mark a tree in the underworld, answering the implicit question, "What would such Stygian trees look like?" As for the letter's final comment, nothing could have been more appreciative of the translator's labors.

As Stevens mentions, Poggioli asked more questions in a "Memorandum" of 7 July 1953, among them the following inquiry: "Could you state briefly the general meaning and intention of the *Blue Guitar* poem?" Stevens obliged, as promised, in the notes of 12 July (*L* 788–91), which begin with his unexceptionable statement of "the general intention of the *Blue Guitar*." But Poggioli, as Stevens expected, had trouble with his handwritten notes and sent them back, marking the ones he could not make out. Stevens responded on 22 July, even offering "to do all my answers to your letter of July 4, 1953, which I return, over again" (*L* 794). Stevens' willingness to help his translator in every way clearly contradicts the myth of the unapproachable poet as a diffident old man. On 21 July, Poggioli confided: "I have compiled a long series of notes, which, to be true, are your work."

The project was now approaching completion. On 1 July, Stevens had expressed great appreciation for Poggioli and "the whole project, which pleases me more than I can tell you. It is a privilege to be translated by you and once the book has been published I shall regard it as a real trophy" (*L* 787). For Stevens this publication was evidently a major event, and it is

gratifying to think of Poggioli and Einaudi giving the elder master so much pleasure.

Poggioli wrote on 23 July saying he was departing "for a sabbatical leave in Europe," and added hopefully: "In case you cross the Atlantic, let me know about it." This indeed would have been an event. On 5 September, writing from near Viareggio, he informed Stevens that "our MS is about to be sent to the printer." Stevens wrote on 10 November how excited he was about the happy and rapid conclusion of the project:

Since only one publisher has handled my books up to the present time, the appearance of a new book by someone else is like the appearance of an old girl in a new dress or, say, a new girl in a new season.

It must be an immense pleasure to be spending the winter in Rome. . . . Against this background Hartford is a little hard to put up with. . . . But, then, after all I am having a book published in Rome and that is excitement enough for any poet. (L 801)

Actually, Einaudi is based not in Rome but in more northerly Turin, yet it is intriguing to imagine Stevens crowned as a poet on the Capitoline Hill (as Petrarch and Tasso were in their day), in the city he had once called pointedly "the head of the world" (NA 148). Poggioli answered from there on 13 November (the mail then seems to have been faster than now) that Stevens should not disparage the United States: "As for Hartford and Boston, Connecticut and Massachusetts, in short, New England, I think they have their beauty too. . . . I know now that one may long after Cambridge too, as my child is doing." He added a postscript:

"Doing churches" in Rome every morning, as if I were an American tourist, I feel something like recognizing somewhere the city where Santayana chose to die, as evoked by your poem . . .

Poggioli also sent Stevens a long list of literary people on both sides of the Atlantic to whom copies of the book were to be sent, asking for additions. Stevens responded with only six names (Samuel F. Morse, Richard Eberhart, Marianne Moore, James Johnson Sweeney, Norman Holmes Pearson, Mrs. Henry Church) and commented:

These are all personal friends of mine. Your own list is most impressive and I am sorry to be unable to match it.<sup>19</sup>

*Mattino domenicale ed altre poesie* was published in the first week of 1954. It included a section of long poems ("Sunday Morning," "Peter Quince at the Clavier," "The Man with the Blue Guitar," "Credences of Summer")

and one of "Lyrics" ("Infanta Marina," "Domination of Black," "The Snow Man," "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock," "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," "The Sun This March," "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm," "The River of Rivers in Connecticut"). Poggioli provided a pithy introduction of only three pages, in which he managed to suggest his appreciation of Stevens and comment aptly on most of the poems included. After mentioning Bernard Berenson's "tactile qualities" of painting in relation to the poems, he noted:

Poetry and music go beyond the three-dimensional world, to operate in the fourth dimension, which telescopes the others, and which is the dimension of sound and rhythm, of time and duration. It is in this dimension that our poet's imagination attains the sense of life and death, of nature's cycles and the phases of existence, of the eternal and the ephemeral.

And it is from these experiences that our poet derives his favorite myths, foremost those of the sun and summer, which occupy so much of his poetry (see for example "Credences of Summer" and "The Sun This March"), or of their opposites, frost and winter (see "The Snow Man"); as well as the supreme contrast between nature and religion, between "things hoped" and "things not seen," which is the subject of that supreme masterpiece, "Sunday Morning." (*Mattino domenicale* 14; my translation)

The words quoted are from Dante's *Paradiso* (24.64–65). Poggioli displayed great perception and discretion in the introduction and managed to say a lot in a few words while still leaving the reader with the sense that it was up to her to discover the wealth of Stevens. Few living poets have ever been treated with so much careful admiration. He concludes:

In comparison with the world of men, slave to its own pathos, the world of things seems dominated by an ethos profound and solemn, by the will to free itself from the chains of the chaotic and amorphous. . . .

Art as catharsis and sublimation of human reality—this is the theme, both new and old, of "Peter Quince at the Clavier." Poetry as metamorphosis and annihilation of reality, imagination as artifice and sacrifice—this is the subject of "The Man with the Blue Guitar," as it is of Rilke's "Fifth Duino Elegy," which, just like the later poem, was inspired by a work of Picasso.

It should not seem strange that it is the poems on art and poetry that are most touched by an element of irony. Stevens is not an aesthete like Mallarmé, nor a mystic like Rilke, but a

skeptic: facing the problem of art, perhaps an even more extreme skeptic than Valéry. That is why it does not matter if the reader of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" will never be able to decide whether the poet plays "things as they are" or not.

What is important to appreciate is that few modern poets have succeeded like Wallace Stevens in giving perfect formal expression to this conflict between *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, between order and disorder, between sound and sense, between the subtlety of discourse and the enchantment of song.

RENATO POGGIOLI  
(*Mattino domenicale* 15–16;  
my translation)

This, as an introduction, "will suffice" (CP 239). It was certainly enough to reveal remarkable powers of discrimination and definition. Poggioli was intellectually very close to Stevens and singular in appreciating so quickly his major stature. His translations, though inevitably they have aged in half a century, are still eloquent. About the line "Tu non suoni le cose come sono" Stevens had characteristically noted: "nothing could be simpler nor more exact" (L 787). When the volume arrived in Hartford, he responded in kind with a warmly appreciative note (5 February 1954):

The copies of *Mattino Domenicale* came a few days ago giving quite a flutter to the colored boy who brought them in to me. He collects stamps. They gave me no less of a flutter when I saw what a handsome book Einaudi has made. The format is fastidious in every respect. I could not be more pleased. (L 817)

He went on to make some deprecating comments about the lack of formal novelty in his work, and concluded: "It has been a great pleasure to work with you and, now that the job is done and the result is visible, I salute you." In his answer (8 February 1954), Poggioli reverted to the subject of translation and the flowery nature of the Italian language:

I still remember how upset I was, all too many years ago, when a great Russian poet, now dead, Vladislav Khodasevich, ended a very favorable review of my translations of Russian poetry by stating that, after all, there was still too much bel canto in them. Well . . . this is not the case this time . . .

It would be truly difficult to match the formal bareness of the later Stevens in another language, and Poggioli's Tuscan (he was, after all, a Florentine) is in fact a little too musical. But he was Stevens' peer in sensibility if not as a writer of verse, as the close of the same letter shows:

Well, this letter ends an experience which was of great value to me. But I hope it will not end the friendship that grew on that experience. One day enriches a year . . .

Please let me know whether your colored boy would like a few more Italian stamps.

The apt quotation was from part 5 of "Credences of Summer." Poggioli's translation of the passage could itself serve as an example of his *bel canto*: "Prospera un giorno l'anno, ed avvulisce / Tutto una donna." Fifty years later this sounds nearly meaningless, especially when compared with the pellucid original: "One day enriches a year. One woman makes / The rest look down" (CP 374). A translator of today would write, more simply and literally:

Un giorno arricchisce l'anno. Una donna fa  
abbassare gli occhi alle altre.

To Poggioli's offer of stamps and of copies of reviews, Stevens responded with characteristic dryness:

I don't think it would be worth while to send copies of reviews because, as you know, I am just about able to tell Italian from Chinese and it would be wrong to put you to any trouble under such circumstances. If there should be any one particular review which you thought worth while, I should be glad to struggle through it. But I have never collected reviews even in English: have never had a clipping service and have never tried to make a literary business out of poetry. . . .

There is always someone here interested in stamps but you must not trouble because that is a bottomless pit.<sup>20</sup>

For Stevens poetry was no mere "literary business." The statement is reminiscent of the introduction to *The Necessary Angel*: "These are not pages of criticism nor of philosophy. Nor are they merely literary pages. They are pages that have to do with one of the enlargements of life" (NA viii). In his own way Stevens, too, upheld an exalted, Shelleyan, idea of poetry.

Poggioli gave a reading of his translations in Florence on 22 February 1954, in the course of a lecture on "Wallace Stevens poeta americano." He sent the invitation to Hartford with a note: "Dear Friend: It was pleasant to read my translations of your poems in my hometown." Meanwhile he had already broached other projects for translations and asked for a few more tips (as on that old problem, the identity of Ramon Fernandez in "The Idea of Order"). Stevens explained patiently once again "I did not consciously have [the critic] in mind," and added: "Your postcard from Florence gave me quite a thrill. Your energy deserves a chaplet" (L 824).

He must have been happy to be addressed as "Friend" by the younger man, for in a letter of 13 October 1954 he mentions having *intended* during a recent trip to Boston to look up Poggioli, back in Cambridge from his year's leave:

I was in Boston a day or two after I received your note . . . and intended to look you up if it was possible. However, I did not get any where near Cambridge and was, in fact, fortunate to catch my train back to Hartford.

It must be a great relief to you to be back from your year in Italy. There is nothing like getting back to work to restore one's tone.

Have you seen a copy of my Collected Poems which Knopf has just issued? May I send you a copy?<sup>21</sup>

It is easy to say, after the event, that one wanted to look somebody up. So the two men were not to see each other after that first reading at Harvard in 1947 when Poggioli had been among the audience. Stevens' observation on the pleasures of returning to work after a long holiday is another of his characteristic gems.

Poggioli answered regretting that their hypothetical meeting had not taken place, and added that he "would be delighted to receive a copy of your collected poems from you." Stevens obliged, and Poggioli thanked him with a card "for the handsome book." Here he could find that "The Rock," the poem whose first reader he had been, was now the title piece of the final section of *The Collected Poems*, and "The River of Rivers in Connecticut," that poem of poems sent to him the year before, was placed at the very end of the magnificent volume, followed only by the valedictory awakening of "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself." Stevens, as we know, had less than a year to live, but his exchange with Renato Poggioli and the "new girl in a new season" they imagined together was a highlight of this, his final phase, and it surely fulfilled that prime requirement of the Supreme Fiction: "It Must Give Pleasure."

University of Genoa  
Italy

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In his honor, The Renato Poggioli Translation Award, established 1978, is regularly conferred by the American Center of PEN, for translations-in-progress from Italian literature.

<sup>2</sup> The lectures on de Staël and Chateaubriand were printed in *Inventario* in 1954–55. It would be fascinating to have the series in full. Two volumes of criticism were published posthumously by Harvard University Press: *The Oaten Flute* and *The Spirit of the Letter* (which includes an essay on translation, "The Added Artificer"). Stevens is barely

mentioned in them. For information on Pogglioli see Harry Levin's Preface to *The Spirit of the Letter* (vii–xi) and Pipicelli, "Profilo" (with Bibliography). I am thankful to Pogglioli's friend and collaborator, Professor Giorgio Luti of Florence, for sending me some hard-to-come-by materials.

<sup>3</sup> Collections by Stevens in other languages appeared in this order: Italian (1954), Danish (1960), German (1961), French (1963), Spanish (1965, 1967), Japanese (1968), Polish (1969), Romanian (1970). See Edelstein 247–61.

<sup>4</sup> The Huntington Library, WAS 286. Renato Pogglioli's letters to Wallace Stevens are reprinted by permission of Sylvia Pogglioli.

<sup>5</sup> WAS 288. This item is reproduced by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California. I am thankful to Sara S. Hodson, Curator of Literary Manuscripts, for her assistance in my research.

<sup>6</sup> Stevens to Pogglioli, 30 January 1950. Carbon copy, The Huntington. Stevens' original letters to Pogglioli of 1947 and 1950 are not among those, all of 1953, that Pogglioli deposited at the Houghton Library, Harvard University.

<sup>7</sup> Stevens to Pogglioli, 30 January 1950.

<sup>8</sup> Stevens to Pogglioli, 14 September 1950. Carbon in The Huntington. The reference to Torquato Tasso (author of *Gerusalemme liberata*, one of those meditative long poems that Stevens came to love more and more) deserves scrutiny, though the implication that Tasso knew little Greek is surely misleading.

<sup>9</sup> Pogglioli to Stevens, 17 May 1950, WAS 290. Reproduced by permission of The Huntington.

<sup>10</sup> Stevens to Pogglioli, 16 May 1950. Carbon in The Huntington.

<sup>11</sup> WAS 293. Reproduced by permission of The Huntington.

<sup>12</sup> L 778. In a letter of 10 June (Houghton) Stevens added to these "Sea Surface Full of Clouds."

<sup>13</sup> WAS 300. Reproduced by permission of The Huntington.

<sup>14</sup> With the title *Mattino domenicale e altre poesie*, and with a "Nota critica" by Guido Carboni. The pagination in this new edition is different, but Pogglioli's text is otherwise unchanged. The minimal change in the title ("e" for "ed") is a sign of varying usage in thirty-four years.

<sup>15</sup> Actually Stevens wrote: "A million people=everybody." Answers on Pogglioli's questionnaire of 4 July (Houghton).

<sup>16</sup> Stevens wrote: "It means."

<sup>17</sup> Houghton Library, fMS Am 1333.1. Reprinted by permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University, and Peter Hanchak. I am thankful to Denison J. Beach of the Houghton Reading Room for help in this matter.

<sup>18</sup> "Pound had developed a theory about 'the intelligence working in nature,' reverence for which formed, he said, 'a tradition that runs from Mencius, through Dante, to Agassiz, needing no particular theories to keep it alive.' When he spoke to Santayana of this 'intelligence,' which enabled the cherry-stone to produce a cherry-tree rather than an oak, Santayana replied on 17 February 1950; 'somehow it possesses a capacity to develop other cherries under favourable circumstances, without getting anything vital wrong. This is "intelligence" of an unconscious sort. I agree in "respecting it." (It would be fussy to object to your word intelligence to describe that potentiality in the cherrystone.)' Pound was irritated by Santayana's use of the word 'unconscious,' but apparently he took the letter to mean that the philosopher had accepted his idea . . . [hence a passage in his canto 95]" (Stock, *Life* 550). Stevens' notion of the world as meditation (in his later volumes) is not far removed from Pound's "intelligence in nature." It is interesting that both should have turned to Santayana, who on the other hand was impatient with what he called (in a letter to Pound) "romantic metaphysics" (Stock 477).

<sup>19</sup> Stevens to Poggioli, 27 November 1953. Carbon in The Huntington.

<sup>20</sup> Stevens to Poggioli, 26 February 1954. Carbon in The Huntington.

<sup>21</sup> Stevens to Poggioli, 13 October 1954. Carbon in The Huntington.

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## Poems Recent Translations

### French

“Re-statement of Romance”

#### Réassertion de la romance

La nuit ne connaît rien des hymnes de la nuit.  
Elle est ce qu'elle est comme je suis qui je suis:  
Et m'en apercevant, je perçois mieux et moi

Et toi. Nous seuls pouvons échanger en chacun  
Ce que chacun des deux peut donner. Et nous seuls  
Sommes deux en un seul, non pas toi et la nuit,

Ni la nuit et moi, mais toi et moi, nous deux seuls,  
Si seulement, si profondément l'un à l'autre,  
Si éloignés des solitudes contingentes,

Que la nuit n'est que toile de fond pour nos êtres,  
Chacun suprêmement vrai à son être propre,  
Dans la pâle lueur que l'un sur l'autre jette.

“The Poems of Our Climate”

#### Les poèmes de notre climat

##### I

Eau claire dans un vase brillant, œillets blancs  
Et roses. Lumière de la pièce semblable  
À quelque air tout neigeux, reflétant de la neige.  
Neige chue récemment, à la fin de l'hiver  
Au moment que reviennent les après-midi.  
Œillets roses et blancs—mais ce que l'on désire  
Est bien plus que cela. La journée elle-même  
Est simplifiée: un vase formé de blancheur,  
Froid, froide porcelaine, basse et circulaire  
Qui ne renferme rien que les présents œillets.

## II

Même si l'on dit que cette simplicité  
Parfaite a évincé les tourments dont l'on souffre,  
Camouflant le funeste, vital composite  
Du Je, le rafraîchissant dans un monde blanc,  
Dans un monde d'eau claire aux rebords scintillants,  
On voudrait davantage, il faudrait davantage  
Que cet univers blanc aux effluves neigeux.

## III

Il resterait toujours l'esprit jamais en paix,  
De telle façon qu'on voudrait fuir, revenir  
À cela qui fut si longuement composé.  
C'est l'imperfection qui est notre paradis.  
Notons que dans cette amertume, le délice,  
Puisque l'imperfection nous tient si fort à cœur,  
Réside dans des mots fautifs, des sons têtus.

"The World as Meditation"

### Le monde comme méditation

*J'ai passé trop de temps à travailler mon  
violon, à voyager. Mais l'exercice essentiel du  
compositeur—la méditation—rien ne l'a  
jamais suspendu en moi. . . Je vis un rêve  
permanent, qui ne s'arrête ni nuit ni jour.*

—Georges Enesco

Est-ce Ulysse qui s'approche par l'orient,  
L'aventurier interminable? Tous les arbres  
Sont émondés. Cet hiver-là est déblayé.

Sur l'horizon quelqu'un se déplace et s'élève  
Au-dessus de sa ligne. Une forme de feu  
Vient, s'approche des cretonnes de Pénélope,

Dont la seule présence féroce réveille  
Le monde où elle réside. Elle a composé,  
Un long temps, ce qu'elle est avec quoi l'accueillir,

Compagne de cela qu'il est pour elle, qu'elle  
A imaginé, deux êtres dans un abri  
Profondément fondé, l'ami et tendre ami.

Les arbres ont été émondés, en manière  
D'exercice essentiel d'une méditation  
Inhumaine, plus vaste que la sienne. Au soir,

Aucun vent ne l'a gardée comme eût fait un chien.  
Elle ne voulait rien qu'il ne pût lui porter  
Par sa seule venue. Elle ne voulait rien

De recherché. Ses bras lui seraient son collier  
Et son ceinturon, seraient l'ultime fortune  
De leur désir. Mais était-ce vraiment Ulysse?

Ou bien n'était-ce que la chaleur du soleil  
Sur son coussin? La pensée en battait en elle,  
Comme un cœur. Les deux battaient d'unisson. C'était

Le jour, rien que le jour. C'était et ce n'était  
Pas Ulysse. Pourtant, ils s'étaient rencontrés,  
Amie et tendre ami, et encouragement

De toute une planète. La force barbare  
Qui l'habitait ne viendrait jamais à faillir.  
Elle se parlait un peu, peignant ses cheveux,

En répétant ce nom aux syllabes patientes,  
En n'oubliant jamais celui qui s'en venait,  
Qui s'approchait sans cesse, toujours plus prochain.

Gilles Mourier  
Paris  
France

## Spanish

### “Anatomy of Monotony”

#### **Anatomía de la monotonía**

##### I

Si de la tierra venimos, fue la tierra  
quien nos hizo ser parte de las cosas,  
y hubo en ello más lascivia de la que hay.  
Suya es nuestra esencia. Y sucede  
que nos hacemos viejos como la tierra  
se hace. Copiamos la muerte de la madre.  
Ella recorre un otoño más vasto que el viento,  
llora por nosotros y, más fría que la escarcha  
el alma nos alerta en el verano, al terminar,  
y en el ámbito desnudo de estos cielos  
ve un cielo más desnudo que no se ha de doblar.

##### II

El cuerpo avanza desnudo en el sol  
y, por ternura o por pena, el sol  
le da placer, y otros cuerpos vienen,  
combinando fantasía y artificio,  
y, capaces de moverse, tocar, sonar,  
logran que ese cuerpo clame de deseo  
por cuerdas aún más finas e implacables.  
Que así sea. Pero el espacio y la luz  
por donde el cuerpo anda lo han burlado,  
cae de ese cielo fatal y tan desnudo,  
y el espíritu ve esto, apesumbrado.

### “The Red Fern”

#### **El helecho rojo**

El día de anchas hojas se apresura,  
y abre, en este rincón familiar  
su extraño, difícil helecho,  
que impone, que impone rojo tras rojo.

Hay dobles de este helecho allá en las nubes,  
menos firmes que la paternal llamarada,  
si bien impregnados de su identidad,  
reflejos y brotes, motas que lo imitan

y pizcas nebulosas, instantes suspendidos que crecen  
más allá de su lazo con el paterno tronco:  
el centro que deslumbra, creciente, más brillante,  
el fuego-padre que arde con furia . . .

Niño, en la vida es suficiente  
hablar de lo que ves. Pero ya verás  
cuando la visión despierte al ojo soñoliento  
y perfore la física certeza de las cosas.

“The Green Plant”

### La planta verde

El silencio es una forma que ha pasado.  
Las rosas-león de Octubre se han vuelto papel  
y las sombras de los árboles  
son como rotos paraguas.

El gastado glosario del verano  
no nos dice nada ya.

El castaño en la base del rojo  
el naranja al final del amarillo,

son falsificaciones de un sol  
en un espejo, sin calor,  
en un constante segundo plano,  
una curva que desciende hacia el final—

salvo que una planta verde fulge, mientras miras  
la leyenda del bosque marrón y oliva,  
fulge, más allá de la leyenda, con el bárbaro verde  
de la agreste realidad de la que es parte.

Eugenia Flores de Molinillo  
National University of Tucumán  
Argentina

## Italian

“Mud Master”

### Maestro della melma

I fiumi melmosi della primavera  
Stanno ringhiando  
Sotto cieli melmosi.  
La mente è melmosa.

Sinora, per la mente, nuovi argini  
Di verde gonfio  
Non sono;  
Fianchi di cielo d'oro  
Non sono.  
La mente ringhia.

Nerissimo fra i neretti,  
C'è un maestro della melma.  
Il fascio di luce  
Che cade, lontano, di cielo in terra,  
Eccolo:

Il costruttore dei germogli di pesco,  
Il maestro della melma,  
Il maestro della mente.

“The Planet on the Table”

### Il pianeta sul tavolo

Ariel era contento di avere scritto le sue poesie.  
Erano di un tempo ricordato  
O di cose viste che gli erano piaciute.

Altre opere del sole  
Erano spreco e scompiglio,  
L'arbusto maturo intristiva.

Il suo io e il sole erano tutt'uno  
E le poesie, opere del suo io,  
Erano non meno opere del sole.

Non importava che sopravvivessero.  
Quel che contava era che mostrassero  
Qualche lineamento o carattere,

Qualche abbondanza, anche se appena percepibile,  
Nella povertà delle loro parole;  
Del pianeta di cui erano parte.

“A Clear Day and No Memories”

### **Un giorno chiaro e nessuna memoria**

Nessun soldato nel paesaggio,  
Nessun pensiero di persone morte,  
Come erano cinquant'anni fa,  
Giovani e vive in un'aria viva,  
Giovani e a passeggio nel sole,  
Curve in abiti blu per toccare qualcosa,  
Oggi la mente non è parte del tempo che fa.

Oggi l'aria è libera di tutto.  
Non ha percezione se non del nulla  
E scorre su noi senza significati,  
Come se nessuno di noi fosse mai stato qui in  
precedenza  
E non vi fosse ora: in questo spettacolo angusto,  
Quest'attività invisibile, questo senso.

Massimo Bacigalupo  
University of Genova  
Italy

“The Snow Man”<sup>†</sup>

### **L'Uomo di neve**

Bisogna conoscere l'inverno fino in fondo  
per capire l'acqua gelata  
e i ciuffi dei rami incrostati di neve;

<sup>†</sup>This is Tonino Guerra's literal rendition in Italian of his more poetic imitation of “The Snow Man” that follows in Romagnolo, an Italian dialect.

e bisogna che il freddo da molto  
si sia infilato nel sangue  
per capire le creste di ghiaccio dei ginepri  
e le macchie degli abeti nella luce sbiadita  
del sole di gennaio;

bisogna pensare che il lamento del vento  
tra le foglie rade è la voce del mondo  
che passa sulla terra vuota.

Per qualcuno che sta a sentire  
non c'è niente in più di quello che ha dattorno:  
c'è la neve, il vento e basta.

## Romagnolo

"The Snow Man"

### L'Òm ad nàiva

Bsògna cnòss l'invéran fin in fònd  
par capói l'aqua gèleda  
e i cióff dal ramài incrustèdi 'd nàiva;

e bsògna che e' frèdd da un pèz  
u s séa infilé te sangh  
par capói al cresti 'd giazz di ginépar  
e al maci di abéid tla luce sbiavòida  
de soul 'd znér;

bsògna pansè che i céul de vént  
tra 'l fòi rèdi l'è la vòusa de mònd  
ch'la pasa sòura una tera svóita.

Par éun ch'e' staga a santói  
u n gn'è gnént in piò ad quell ch'l'à datònda:  
u i è la nàiva, e' vént e basta.

Tonino Guerra  
Pennabilli, Urbino-Pesaro  
Italy

## German

“The Emperor of Ice-Cream”

### Der Herrscher der Eiscreme

Ruf den Roller der dicken Zigarren,  
Den muskulösen, und sag: Bitte schlag  
In Küchenschüsseln verschlagenen Quark.  
Lass die Maiden in solchen Kleidern bummeln  
Wie sie sie immer tragen und sag den Buben:  
Bringt Blumen in uralten Zeitungen.  
Sei Sein das Finale des Scheins.  
Der Herrscher der Eiscreme ist Herrscher allein.

Nimm von der Kiefernkommode,  
Der die drei Glasknöpfe fehlen, das Laken,  
Auf das sie einst Pfautauben gestickt,  
Breit es aus und bedeck ihr Gesicht.  
Wenn ihre schwieligen Füße vorragen, soll  
Das dir sagen, wie kalt sie ist und still.  
Die Lampe werfe ihren Schein.  
Der Herrscher der Eiscreme ist Herrscher allein.

“The Idea of Order at Key West”

### Der Gedanke der Ordnung bei Key West

Sie sang jenseits der Muse des Meeres.  
Das Wasser formte sich niemals zu Geist oder Stimme,  
Wie mächtige, weite Masse, ein Körper,  
Der mit leeren Ärmeln weht; und doch: seine Mimik  
Schuf ständiges Rauschen, erzeugte ständig ein Raunen,  
Das, obgleich wir verstanden, nicht unser war,  
Nicht menschlich, des wahrhaftigen Ozeans.

Die See war keine Maske; auch nicht sie.  
Gesang und Wasser mischten nicht ihre Laute,  
Selbst wenn was sie sang, das war, was sie hörte,  
Da was sie sang in Worten ertönte.  
Es mag sein, dass in all ihren Phrasen  
Das mahlende Wasser und der keuchende Wind rührten;  
Doch war es sie, und nicht die See, die wir hörten.

Denn sie war der Schöpfer des Lieds, das sie sang.  
Die ewig maskierte, tragisch gestikulierende See  
War nur ein Ort, an dem sie singend ging.  
Wessen Geist ist dies? sagten wir, weil wir wussten,  
Dass es der Geist war, den wir suchten, und wussten,  
Dass wir dies oft noch fragen sollten, als sie sang.

Wenn es die dunkle Stimme nur war der See,  
Die sich erhob oder gar färbte mit vielen Wellen;  
Wenn es die äußere Stimme nur war von Himmel  
Und Wolke, versunkner Korallen, vom Wasser umwandelt,  
Wie klar auch immer, würd es doch tiefes Lied gewesen sein,  
Die wogenden Worte der Luft, ein Sommerklang,  
In einem Sommer ohne Ende wiederholt,  
Und Klang allein. Doch war es mehr als das,  
Mehr noch als ihre Stimme, und die unsre, unter  
Dem sinnlosen Stampfen von Wasser und Wind,  
Theatralischen Fernen, bronzenen Schatten auf hohe  
Horizonte gehäuft, bergigen Stimmungen  
Von Himmel und See.

Es war ihre Stimme, die den Himmel  
In seinem Schwinden am dringlichsten machte.  
Sie bemaß der Stunde Einsamkeit.  
Sie war die einzige Erbauerin der Welt,  
In der sie sang. Und wenn sie sang, wurde  
Die See, was ihr Wesen auch war, das Wesen  
Ihres Liedes, denn sie war der Schöpfer. Und dann,  
Als wir allein dort schreitend sie erblickten,  
Wussten wir, dass es nie eine Welt für sie gab  
Als die, die sie sang und, singend, schuf.

Ramon Fernandez, sag mir, wenn du kannst,  
Warum, als der Gesang geendet, und wir zur Stadt  
Uns wandten, sag mir, warum die glasigen Lichter,  
Die Lichter der Fischerboote dort vor Anker,  
Als die Nacht hereinbrach, in der Luft sich neigend,  
Die Nacht beherrschten und die See aufteilten,  
Erleuchtete Zonen verankerten und feurige Pfosten,  
Die Nacht anordneten, vertieften, bezauberten.

O! Gesegnete Ordnungswut, bleicher Ramon,  
Des Schöpfers Wut, Worte der See zu ordnen,  
Worte der duftenden Portale dunkler Sterne  
Und von uns selbst und unseren Ursprungs  
In geisterhafteren Grenzen, schärferen Klängen.

“Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself”

**Keine Eindrücke, sondern das Ding an sich**

Am frühesten Winterende, im März,  
Schien ein spärlicher Schrei von draußen  
Wie ein Laut in seinem Geist.

Er wusste, dass er ihn hörte,  
Ein Vogelschrei, bei Tageslicht oder zuvor,  
Im frühen Märzwind.

Die Sonne ging auf gegen sechs,  
Nicht mehr bloß ein flacher Schwung über Schnee. . .  
Die sie draußen gewesen wäre.

Sie kam nicht aus dem weiten Ventriloquismus  
Des blassen Papiermâchés des Schlafs . . .  
Die Sonne kam von draußen.

Dieser spärliche Schrei—war  
Ein Chorsänger, dessen ‘C’ dem Chor voranging.  
War Teil der kolossalen Sonne,

Umkreist von ihren choralen Ringen,  
Noch weit entfernt. Es war wie  
Eine neue Kenntnis der Wirklichkeit.

Andreas Hau  
Saarland University  
Germany

## Dutch

“Frogs Eat Butterflies. Snakes Eat Frogs. Hogs Eat Snakes.  
Men Eat Hogs”

### **Kikkers eten vlinders. Slangen eten kikkers. Varkens eten slangen. Mensen eten varkens**

Het is waar dat de rivieren voortsnuffelden als zwijnen,  
Aan de oevers sleurden, tot zij begonnen te lijken  
Op uitgeblazen buikklinken in suffige troggen,

Dat de lucht zwaar was van de adem van die zwijnen,  
De adem van gezwollen zomer, en  
Zwaar met het rattapallax van de donder,

Dat de man die dit hutje optrok, dit veld  
Beplante, en het een poosje onderhield,  
Onwetend was over de fratsen van beeldspraak,

Dat de uren van zijn lome, droge dagen,  
Grotesk door dit gesnuffel tussen oevers,  
Deze suffigheid en rattapallax,

Zich schenen te zogen aan zijn droge wezen,  
Zoals de zwijnachtige rivieren zich zogen  
Op hun weg zeewaarts naar de zeemonden.

“The Man on the Dump”

### **De man op de belt**

Dag kruipt neer. De maan kruipt stilaan omhoog.  
De zon is een corbeille van bloemen die de maan Blanche  
Daar zet, een boeket. Hoho . . . De belt is vol  
Beelden. Dagen vliegen voorbij als kranten van de pers.  
De boeketten komen hier in kranten. Zo komen de zon,  
En zo de maan, allebei, en de conciërgegedichten  
Van alledag, de wikkel rond het blik peren,  
De kat in de papieren zak, het korset, het krat  
Uit Estland: de tijgerkist, voor de thee.

De frisheid van de nacht is lang reeds fris geweest.  
De frisheid van de ochtend, het schallen van de dag, men zegt  
Dat hij puft zoals Cornelius Nepos leest, hij puft

Meer dan, minder dan of hij puft zus of zo.  
Het groen smakt in het oog, de dauw in het groen  
Smakt als vers water in een kan, als de zee  
Op een kokosnoot—hoeveel mannen hebben dauw gekopieerd  
Voor hun knopen, hoeveel vrouwen hebben zichzelf bedekt  
Met dauw, dauwjurken, steentjes en kettingen van dauw, hoofden  
Van de bloemigste bloemen bedauwd met de dauwigste dauw.  
Men gaat zulke dingen haten tenzij op de belt.

Nu, in het lenteseizoen (azalea's, trilliums,  
Mirte, viburnums, narcissen, blauwe flox),  
Tussen gene walging en deze in, tussen de dingen  
Die op de belt liggen (azalea's en zo meer)  
En die welke er zullen liggen (azalea's en zo meer),  
Voelt men de zuiverende verandering. Men verwerpt  
Het vuil.

Dat is het moment waarop de maan omhoogkruipt  
Bij het stotteren van fagotten. Dat is de tijd  
Waarop men naar de olifantenkleuren van de banden kijkt.  
Alles wordt afgeworpen; en de maan komt op als de maan  
(Al haar beelden liggen op de belt) en je ziet  
Als een man (niet zoals een beeld van een man),  
Je ziet de maan klimmen in de lege lucht.

Men zit en slaat op een oude tinnen kan, reuzel-emmer.  
Men slaat en slaat om dat wat men gelooft.  
Dat is waar men dichterbij wil. Zou het ten slotte  
Louter jezelf kunnen zijn, zo superieur als het oor  
Aan een kraaiestem? Martelde de nachtegaal het oor,  
Bepakte hij het hart en schraapte hij de geest? En vindt het oor  
Troost voor zichzelf in gemelijke vogels? Is het vrede,  
Zijn het de wittebroodsweken van een filosoof die men vindt  
Op de belt? Is het tussen matrassen van de doden te zitten,  
Flessen, potten, schoenen en gras en *treffendste avond* te  
mompelen:  
Is het het wauwelen van bootstaarten te horen en te zeggen  
*Onzichtbare priester*; is het de dag uitwerpen, hem  
Aan stukken rijten en te roepen *strofe mijn steen*?  
Waar was het dat men het eerst van de waarheid hoorde? De de.

“The Plain Sense of Things”

### De gewone zin der dingen

Nadat de blaren zijn gevallen, keren wij terug  
Tot de gewone zin der dingen. Het is alsof  
Wij waren gekomen aan een eind van de verbeelding,  
Zielloos in een inert savoir.

Het is moeilijk zelfs om het adjectief te kiezen  
Voor deze lege koude, deze droefheid zonder oorzaak.  
De grote structuur is een kleiner huis geworden.  
Geen tulband loopt over de gekrompen vloeren.

De broeikas moest nooit zo dringend geschilderd worden.  
De schoorsteen is vijftig jaar oud en helt naar een kant.  
Een fantastische moeite is mislukt, een herhaling  
In een monotonie van mensen en vliegen.

Maar de afwezigheid van de verbeelding moest  
Zelf verbeeld worden. De grote vijver,  
De gewone zin ervan, zonder weerspiegelingen, blaren,  
Modder, water als smerig glas, een of andere stilte

Uitdrukkelijk, stilte van een rat die naar buiten kwam om te zien,  
De grote vijver en zijn verspilling van lelies, dit alles  
Moest verbeeld worden als een onvermijdelijke kennis,  
Vereist, zoals een noodzaak vereist.

Bart Eeckhout  
Ghent University  
Belgium

## Polish

“Domination of Black”

### Dominacja czerni

W nocy przy kominku  
Kolory krzaków  
I opadłych liści  
Powtarzały się  
I wirowały w pokoju  
Jak same liście  
Wirujące na wietrze.  
Tak. Ale kolor ciężkich świerków  
Wszedł, odmierzając kroki.  
I przypomniałem sobie krzyk pawie.

Kolory ich ogonów  
Były jak liście  
Wirujące na wietrze,  
Na wietrze o zmierzchu.  
Omiatały cały pokój,  
Opadały z gałęzi świerków  
Na ziemię.  
Słyszałem, jak krzyczały—pawie.  
Czy krzyczały przeciw zmierzchowi  
Czy też przeciw liściom  
Wirującym na wietrze,  
Wirującym jak płomienie  
W ogniu,  
Wirującym jak pawie ogony  
W głośnym ogniu,  
Głośnym jak świerki  
Pełne krzyku pawie?  
A może krzyczały przeciw świerkom?

Widziałem, jak za oknem  
Planety gromadzą się  
Niczym liście  
Wirujące na wietrze.  
Widziałem, jak nadeszła noc,  
Odmierzała kroki jak kolor ciężkich świerków.  
Przestraszyłem się  
I przypomniałem sobie krzyk pawie.

“Valley Candle”

### Świczka w dolinie

Moja świeczka migota<sup>3</sup>a w wielkiej dolinie.  
Promienie ogromnej nocy skupiały się na niej,  
Aż powiał wiatr.  
Wtedy promienie ogromnej nocy  
Skupiły się na jej obrazie,  
Aż powiał wiatr.

“The Reader”

### Czytelnik

Przez całą noc czytałem książkę,  
Siedziałem i czytałem, jakby w książce  
Z mrocznymi stronami.

Była jesień, spadające gwiazdy  
Zakryły wysuszone kształty, które  
Przycupnęły w świetle Księżycy.

Czytałem bez zapalonej lampy,  
Jakiś głos mamrotał: „Wszystko  
Powraca do zimna,

Nawet aromatyczny muszkatel,  
Melony, cynobrowe gruszki  
W bezlistnym ogrodzie.”

Na mrocznych stronach nie było druku  
Z wyjątkiem śladu płonących gwiazd  
Na mroźnym niebie.

Jacek Gutorow  
University of Opole  
Poland

## Japanese

“The Beginning”

### 始まり

それで、夏がついにはいくつかの染みに変わり、  
ドアのさびや腐食となって現われた。そのドアから、  
彼女は出ていったのだが。

家はからっぽ。でも、彼女はここに座っていて、  
その露に濡れた髪を梳いていた。触れる事ができない輝き。

彼女はその色濃い、虹色のきらめきにとまどっていた。  
この鏡を、彼女はよく見つめていた。

歴史のない、瞬間の存在を。  
完璧に理解された、夏自らの姿を。

そして感じていた。その陽気さと微笑みを。  
驚いていた。震えていた。手も唇も。

この椅子は、そこで彼女がドレスをたくし上げていた場所。  
入念に作られた、豪華な織布。

12回の鐘に合わせて、職工が作った織物。  
そのドレスは見捨てられて、床の上に転がっている。

今、悲劇を語る、最初の親しげな言葉たちが、  
まず手始めにと、軒下で静かに語られている。

### Hajimari

Sorede natsu ga tsuini wa ikutsuka no shimi ni kawari,  
doa no sabi ya fushoku to natte arawareta. Sono doa kara kanojo  
wa deteita no daga.

Ie wa karappo. Demo kanojo wa kokoni suwatte ite,  
sono tsuyu ni nureta kami wo suite ita. Fureru koto ga dekinai  
kagayaki.

Kanojo wa sono irokoi, nijiiro no kirameki ni tomadotte ita.  
Kono kagami wo, kanojo wa yoku mitsumete ita.

Rekishi no nai, shunkan no sonzai wo.  
Kanpeki ni rikaisareta, natsu mizukara no sugata wo.

Soshite kanjite ita. Sono yokisa to hohoemi wo.  
Oodoroite ita. Furuete ita. Te mo kuchibiru mo.

Kono isu wa, soko de kanojo ga doresu wo takushiagete ita basho.  
Nyunen ni tsukurareta, goshana orinuno.

Junikai no kane ni awasete, shokko ga tsukutta orimono.  
Sono doresu wa misuterarete yuka no ueni korogatte iru.

Ima higeki wo kataru, saisho no shitashigena kotobatachi ga,  
mazu tehajimeni to, nokishita de shizukani katararete iru.

“Tea”

## お茶

公園でゾウの耳が  
霜の寒さに震え、  
道端の葉っぱが、  
ねずみみたいに走る時、  
きみのランプの明かりが、  
海と空の色をした、  
ジャワの傘のような、  
輝く枕の上に落ちた。

## Ocha

Koen de zo no mimi ga  
shimo no samusa ni furue,  
michibata no happa ga,  
nezumi mitaini hashiru toki,  
kimi no ranpu no akari ga  
umi to sora no iro wo shita  
Jawa no kasa no yona,  
kagayaku makurano ueni ochita.

Hiroto Iwanaga and Janet Denny  
Tokyo University of Agriculture  
Japan

## Reviews

### Wallace Stevens and the Seasons.

By George S. Lensing. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001.

In *Wallace Stevens and the Seasons*, George S. Lensing surprises us. Given the title, one would anticipate a discussion of the seasonal cycle in Stevens, beginning with spring and ending, appropriately enough, with winter. Such a study would not only arc the traditional metaphorical cycle of our lives but also reflect what many see as Stevens' own sense of a seasonal progression in his poetry, as the titles of his works, especially the later ones, suggest: *Transport to Summer*, *The Auroras of Autumn*, and *The Rock*, which contains those starker and barer poems intimating winter. But Lensing begins with autumn, and the reasons are fundamental. First, such a beginning corrects this misapprehension: after all, the last poem in *The Collected Poems* occurs in March, "at the earliest ending of winter" (and, as Lensing shows, a seasonal interplay takes place throughout all the volumes). But more important, Lensing selects autumn because the season as metaphor contains what is key to understanding Stevens' poetics: the need to establish a credible belief in reality.

Autumn initiates the cycle of grounding Stevens' poetry in the real, no easy task when, in Nietzschean fashion, Stevens believes that all one can ever know is fiction, that even the last illusion is disillusion. But Lensing demonstrates that in Stevens' autumnal poems Stevens pursues a reductive mode to attain an authentic and vitalizing sense of reality, even if it is present only momentarily. "Thus, 'Autumn Refrain' accomplishes what all the poems of autumn set out to do: it purges 'evasions' in order to find the 'residuum' of that which perdures" (82). When Stevens pushes this decreative motive to its extreme, so that even the self disappears, as it does in such poems as "The Snow Man" and "The Course of a Particular," he enters his winter mode: "Such a total identity [of self and nature], even if it remains only a supposition, is what distinguishes Stevens' poems of winter from those of autumn" (112). Why is this perception of an unadulterated *ding an sich* important? Lensing does not mince his words: "Such moments of encounter with the absolute are rare in Stevens, though they should give the lie to any notion that his world is totally a subjective one" (36).

Confident in these momentary affirmations of reality, Stevens writes his poems of spring. These poems celebrate a renewed sense of self, a rebirth of the spirit, and a reawakened sense of the "never-resting mind." No longer are subjectivity or the embellishments of the imagination suppressed. Lensing offers "The World as Meditation" as paradigm:

an awakening at daybreak as the mind eagerly reaches out to the external world, the meeting or striving to meet of female and male with overt sexual desire, a meditation-as-journey that progresses in stages. There is a motif of incipience and delayed fulfillment (like spring's anticipation of summer) but, correspondingly, a pow-

erful sense of complacency, of frustration relieved, and joy's new permission. (202–03)

Again, when Stevens pushes these expectant moments to the extreme, as he does in proclaiming the Real not only as “fully made” but also as “fully found” in “Credences of Summer,” he crosses the threshold into his metaphorical season of summer. At their extreme, as Lensing demonstrates in one of the strongest sections of the book, these poems manifest secular mysticism, one in which revelatory moments become not only credible but also accessible to others. As Stevens writes in “A Pastoral Nun”: “poetry and apotheosis are one” (CP 378).

Given this brief outline of Stevens' seasons of the imagination, one may at first feel the way the persona does in the opening of “Long and Sluggish Lines”: “It makes so little difference, at so much more / Than seventy, where one looks, one has been there before” (CP 522). But just as that poem progresses to an anticipatory sense of revitalization, so too does Lensing's book reward us with its synthesis of biography and poetry. Like Helen Vendler in *Words Chosen Out of Desire*, Lensing reads Stevens as a poet of intense emotional need and feeling, but unlike Vendler, who focuses on the disclosures within the poems, Lensing reaches out to integrate the life, anchoring poems to particular moments or seeing them as more general expressions of complex emotional states and/or crises. Thus, “Domination of Black” reflects the state of mind of Stevens' early failures as an attorney; his poems of winter manifest not only solitude but also a desperate need for the other; and, most poignantly, poems such as “Yellow Afternoon” and “Artificial Populations” disclose a Stevens who can find recompense for the lack of love in his life only in the sun and landscape of the earth, only in the “artificial populations” of his poetry.

To accomplish such an integration of the life and poetry, Lensing relies on primary material—letters (both published and unpublished), notebooks, personal observations from Peter Brazeau's oral biography—as well as virtually all of the published scholarship. In the process, Lensing abandons chronology, and some readers may not be persuaded by his observations, as when he takes an early notebook entry and applies it to a late poem or discusses a late poem in the context of a much earlier one. But that is because Lensing believes that Stevens has not changed, either as a man or as a poet, and, frankly, he may be right. The same love of nature that filled Stevens' youthful journals finds poetic expression decades later. The same individual who expressed warmth and love in his letters to Elsie is the same man more comfortable in correspondence than in person, the one who could as early as the June Books and as late as “The World as Meditation” demonstrate his love more in words than in the actual world. As Stevens says to Ronald Lane Latimer, encouraging him to pursue another profession to support himself—even if “exclusively for, say, the next twenty-five years”—before returning to his first love of publishing books, “One does not change a great deal; you would not be the same person, but you would be pretty much the same person” (L 320).

*Wallace Stevens and the Seasons* is born out of a seasoned maturity. It has the mark of a meticulous and dedicated scholar, one who has lived with (and loved) the poetry of Wallace Stevens for over forty years. (Would it surprise

you to learn that Lensing has published more articles on Stevens than any one else?) It allows him to be refreshingly blunt, as when he (politely) demolishes the deconstructionists:

For Riddel, Stevens' "search . . . must repeatedly bring into question the idea of center itself." I see no evidence of such a denial of the center itself in Stevens. This is a crucial distinction, because the nothingness of Stevens is not an inherent void but a separation, not a skepticism but a faith, and not a despair but a longing for and even an astonishment at its partial disclosures. It is here that the deconstructionists push Stevens an inch too far, but it is a crucial inch. (129)

Lensing's study stands as one of the landmarks in Stevens scholarship. It provides a much-needed balance from purely theoretical approaches to one grounded not only in the poetry, but also in the man. It serves as a rich and coherent synthesis of all that has been written on Stevens. It will reward both the novice and the experienced reader.

John N. Serio  
Clarkson University

### **Il mondo come meditazione.**

By Wallace Stevens. Edited and translated into Italian by Massimo Bacigalupo. Parma: Ugo Guanda, 1998.

Although this book is essentially a re-edition of a collection of translations from 1986, then entitled *Il mondo come meditazione: ultime poesie 1950–1955* and published by Acquario in Palermo, it offers enough novelty to deserve at least a brief mention in these pages. While the translations, with very few exceptions (one of them suggested by Holly Stevens), are those published fifteen years ago, we get considerable added value in the form of a new introduction and, especially, a circumstantial editorial apparatus at the end, which has been completely revised and expanded. This apparatus contains not only a well-considered translator's rationale (divided into Stevens' use of language, syntax, pronouns, and meter) but also extensive annotations to every single poem as well as a chronology of both the composition and first publication of all included texts.

The driving force behind this book, Massimo Bacigalupo, will be known to most readers of this journal as a long-time champion of Stevens, both as a literary critic and an editor and translator. He has edited *L'angelo necessario* in 1988 (new revised edition, 2000) as well as the luxurious 700-page collection for which he also did most of the translations, *Harmonium: Poesie 1915–1955* (published in 1994 for Einaudi and reviewed in this journal in Spring 1996 by Francesco Rognoni). Bacigalupo is indeed a prolific translator, who has also tackled Wordsworth's 1805 *Prelude* and a hefty selection of Emily Dickinson.

As the earlier subtitle suggests (if a little treacherously), in the present volume he has collected all extant poems written by the septuagenarian Stevens, from the moment the poet turned seventy in October 1949 to his death in

August 1955. According to the blurb this means that we are offered “probably the highest point achieved . . . by one of the masters of American poetry.” Starting with “Angel Surrounded by Paysans” and following up with the twenty-five poems gathered under *The Rock* in *The Collected Poems*, Bacigalupo carefully works his way down to the uncollected or unpublished late poems reprinted in *Opus Posthumous*, thus arriving at a sizable total of fifty-seven poems in all. For his final section he sticks to the sequence found in the 1957 edition of *Opus Posthumous* (and omits the question marks for poems whose composition date is really uncertain). Somewhat surprisingly, however, and without real justification, he finishes his collection with the schematic one-line notes of “Abecedarium of Finesoldier,” which hardly deserve to be called a poem and are not included as such in either Morse’s or Bates’s editions of *Opus Posthumous*.

Given the Italian audience to which the volume is addressed, we cannot be surprised that Bacigalupo’s new, ten-page introduction borrows its title from “To an Old Philosopher in Rome.” In “A Citizen of Heaven though Still of Rome,” Bacigalupo etches a richly detailed portrait of the later Stevens that adds some pleasant touches of daring to its efficient overview. Thus, he boldly claims that “Stevens is always a crystalline poet, without obscurity except in the material sense of a hard and obscure word, like a piece of mosaic.” In discussing “To an Old Philosopher in Rome,” he even impresses upon his Italian readers that Stevens’ “abstracted Rome . . . is perhaps the most profoundly imagined and felt Rome of twentieth-century poetry.” No less assuredly, he moves on to argue that “the fundamental theme of Stevens is happiness.” And he concludes glowingly by insisting that in his final poems Stevens

repeatedly touches upon the nerve-ends of our existence, whose supreme figuration he offers. As in other works of poetry in its pure mode, for example the sonnets of Shakespeare, the world becomes rhetoric, but then the rhetoric of the most flourishing or simplified language returns to concern the world. The originality and the power and the humble craftsmanship of Stevens are second to no other poet in the tradition that he renews by enacting *tabula rasa* upon it.

Something of the same assertive and mostly admiring quality returns in the endnotes, where Bacigalupo has the habit of pronouncing judgment on the poems, clearly marking what he considers to be major texts. Both “The World as Meditation” (whose title is not coincidentally borrowed for the entire book) and “The River of Rivers in Connecticut,” for instance, are among his more obvious favorites. Indeed, one of the greater pleasures afforded by the annotations to the individual poems (which are some ten lines long on average and take up fifteen close-set pages) is that they do more than provide neutral background facts; they also, and primarily, constitute miniature critical paraphrases on the themes and structures of the poems. “The Cliffs of Moher,” for example, is compared to “a ‘koan’ in the practice of Zen Buddhism.” “The Plain Sense of Things” is resolutely placed in Elizabeth Park

(inspired by the pond at the end of this poem but apparently ignoring the description of Stevens' own symbolized house) and the "fantastic effort" that "has failed" there is identified as that of spring. There is an inevitably didactic touch to such proclamations and they literally leave little room for the polysemy and ambiguity that mark Stevens' poetry, yet Bacigalupo does an excellent job at initiating his Italian readers, highlighting such fine nuances as the double meaning of "interior" in "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour." And he is just as able to surprise his audience with a quote from Dante to elucidate "The River of Rivers in Connecticut." At his transcultural best, he plays with his notes in ways that betray the refinement of his own cultural erudition. One must be a melomaniac, for instance, to move from A to C to G in thus explaining the chorister in "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself": "The bird is like a chorister that intones an A to his companions [the actual note used to tune up choirs, after first sounding a diapason]. . . . Stevens plays with C in the sense of the letter that opens the word 'choir' and the musical note that precedes that of the orchestra. In the translation this is replaced by the assonance between *sol* [the note G in Italian] and *sole* [the Italian for sun]." When we next look back at Bacigalupo's translation of the poem, we enjoy even more the pleasurable playful result, with its richly alliterative and assonantal texture and sudden rhyme:

Quello stento grido . . . era  
 Un corista il cui sol precede il coro.  
 Era parte del sole colossale,

Circondato dai suoi anelli corali,  
 Ancora lontano. Era come  
 Una nuova conoscenza del reale.

As a non-Italian with only a dilettante smattering of the language, I am incompetent to further judge the quality of Bacigalupo's translations in this book. Francesco Rognoni's earlier eulogy on the way Bacigalupo renders Stevens with the "utmost fidelity" is better evidence than any I could possibly offer. The interested reader may look elsewhere in the present issue also for comments by Bacigalupo himself glossing some of his translator's rationale, particularly with respect to the issue of meter. The felicity of forgoing strict metrical imitation is, I believe, repeatedly made clear in this collection. By aiming at the greatest possible lexical and syntactic precision as well as general rhythmic effect—three features that are arguably most important to an aesthetic appreciation of Stevens' work—and by surrounding his Italian versions with such detailed and inspiring commentary, Bacigalupo is able to present the most seductive of Stevens' faces to an Italian readership that no longer seems to have any excuse for misrecognizing the true stature of that most unspectacular man from Hartford.

Bart Eeckhout  
 Ghent University  
 Belgium

## News and Comments

Poetry editor Joseph Duemer has won the 2000 Ohio State University/*The Journal Award* for his latest collection, *Magical Thinking*. The volume was published by The Ohio State University Press in November 2001. Duemer's previous collections are *Static* (Owl Creek Press) and *Customs* (University of Georgia Press). Duemer's poems have appeared in numerous journals, including *The American Poetry Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *Ploughshares*, *The New England Review*, and *Manoa*, as well as *The Wallace Stevens Journal*. He recently edited a selection of contemporary Vietnamese poetry for the journal *Poetry International*. We are fortunate to have him serve as our poetry editor.

\* \* \*

"Early versus Late Stevens" will be this year's topic of the Wallace Stevens Society program at the MLA Convention in New Orleans. Arranged by Maureen Kravec, the panel will feature the following papers: "The Course of a Particular Poet" by Steven Monte (Univ. of Chicago); "Intentionality as Sensuality in *Harmonium*" by Charles Altieri (Univ. of California, Berkeley); and " 'The Vegetation Still Abounds with Forms': A Translator's Experience with the Transformations of Wallace Stevens's Poetry" by Bart Eeckhout (Ghent Univ., Belgium). George Lensing will serve as respondent. The event has been scheduled for Saturday, December 29, 2001, from 10:15 to 11:30 a.m., in Grand Couteau, Sheraton.

\* \* \*

In November 2000, the Huntington Library purchased from Serendipity Books, Berkeley, Calif., five volumes owned by Wallace Stevens while at Harvard. The volumes include *Amelia*, *The History of Tom Jones*, and *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews*, all by Henry Fielding; *Selections from the Prose Writings of Jonathan Swift*; and G. E. Lessing's *The Laocoön, and Other Prose Writings of Lessing's*. All the volumes are signed by Stevens. *Amelia* bears modest underscoring and the Lessing volume is heavily annotated. These titles join the bulk of Stevens' library already in the Huntington.

\* \* \*

In December 2000, The Academy of American Poets selected Frank Bidart as the recipient of the Wallace Stevens Award. The annual \$150,000 award recognizes outstanding and proven mastery in the art of poetry. Jury chair Louise Glück said of Bidart, "His work has been, from the start, remarkable in its disdain for the soothing, the sentimental, the facile, the partial. He is, in the feeling of our jury, one of the great poets of our time." The Wallace Stevens Award, formerly known as the Tanning Prize, was established in 1994 by a gift to the Academy from the painter Dorothea Tanning and, at her request, renamed in honor of Wallace Stevens. Previous recipients have been W. S. Merwin, James Tate, Adrienne Rich, Anthony Hecht, A. R. Ammons, and Jackson Mac Low.

\* \* \*

The fourth annual Wallace Stevens Memorial Poetry Reading took place in Elizabeth Park in West Hartford during the Rose Festival weekend in June. Those who read their own poetry were Vivian Shipley, a teacher in the Creative Writing Program at Southern Connecticut State University, editor of the *Connecticut Poetry Review*, and author of several volumes of poetry; Maria Sassi, a faculty member at Hartford College for Women and author of two books of poetry; and two student poets, Sarah Rizzuto, from Cheshire, Conn., and Rebekah Hayes from Suffield, Conn. The event is sponsored by the Hartford Friends and Enemies of Wallace Stevens, with support from the Friends of Elizabeth Park and Hartford Public Library.

\* \* \*

In a July 19, 2001, article, the *Hartford Courant* reported that playwright Christopher Shinn (a native of Wethersfield, Conn.) received a National Endowment for the Arts/Theatre Communications Group grant, establishing a residency at Hartford Stage where he began work on a new play involving Wallace Stevens. Three of Shinn's plays have been produced in London. His play *Four* was produced in New York and "received unanimous acclaim from the major critics."

\* \* \*

The 6th Annual Wallace Stevens Birthday Bash took place on Saturday, December 1, 2001, from 6:30 to 10:00 p.m. Celebrants joined guest speaker Mark Strand at the Hartford Public Library for a program that included wine and hors d'oeuvres, birthday cake and champagne. There was also an exhibition of works inspired by Wallace Stevens by artist Kathryn Jacobi, art editor of *The Wallace Stevens Journal*. The event is sponsored annually by the Hartford Friends and Enemies of Wallace Stevens and the Connecticut Center for the Book.

\* \* \*

Since 1964, America's top poets have celebrated Stevens at the University of Connecticut's annual Wallace Stevens Program. The guest poet for 2001 was Yusef Komunyakaa. He appeared at UConn's Storrs campus on April 4, 2001, at 8:00 p.m., and at the Charter Oak Cultural Center in Hartford at noon the following day.

\* \* \*

A Wallace Stevens Scholarship will be awarded yearly to a Hartford high school student who exhibits exemplary ability as a poet. For more information, contact Daniel Schnaidt at [dschnaidt@wesleyan.edu](mailto:dschnaidt@wesleyan.edu).

\* \* \*

Once again, we thank the Lannan Foundation for its generous patronage.

Sara S. Hodson  
The Huntington Library

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