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Again Is an Oxymoron: William James’s Ideas on Repetition and Wallace Stevens’ “Sea Surface Full of Clouds”

KAY HAREL

SEA SURFACE FULL OF CLOUDS” is as unfathomable as the ocean itself once was. In the case of the ocean, sonar came along and with it scientists measured the depths for us and charted their topography. We cannot map “Sea Surface Full of Clouds.” We have no sonar for poetry, no method for charting the emotional lay of a poem. But we feel a need to sound its meaning. We have a drive to apprehend poems as “accurate songs” (CP 388). As it happens, there is a scientist possessed of a sonar for experience, an accurate way to chart the ever-shifting geography of the self through time: William James. In his magnum opus The Principles of Psychology (1890), James offers many insights that we can use to map at least some of the depths of this eminent poem.

While James has diverse ideas that can enrich our understanding of “Sea Surface Full of Clouds,” among the most fruitful are those about repetition, which derive from Heraclitus’ formulation that we can never step in the same river twice. From James’s work with this conceit comes an understanding that the very concept of “again” is an oxymoron: what happens for the second time is completely unlike what happened the first time simply because it is happening for the second time. The first time, the event was new, while the second time the event is not new. As James is well aware, experience makes impossible an identical again. In the same vein, the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze notes, “Difference inhabits repetition. . . . Difference lies between two repetitions” (76).

There are other important complexities within again; it is, in fact, among those words whose sense cannot be represented by language in James’s view. In Principles, he asserts that “no existing language is capable of doing justice” (238) to conjunctions, prepositions, adverbial phrases, and so forth. “We ought to say a feeling of and, a feeling of if. . . . quite as readily as we say a feeling of blue or a feeling of cold. Yet we do not: . . . language almost refuses to lend itself” (238) to such uses, he writes. Language is, in other words, unsuited to representing the relations among nouns, among events.

James’s apprehension of how meaning, thought, feeling, and experience reside in the gaps left by language helps us appreciate how Stevens’
repetitions affect our reception of this poem. After its astonishing linguistic beauty, the most striking aspect of “Sea Surface Full of Clouds” is its repetitions, its myriad agains. Stevens rigorously places identical lines in the same places across stanzas; he uses many words over and over; he focuses on the same objects; and, of course, he harps on his kaleidoscopic blooms. With his repetitions, Stevens gives us the experience of experience as temporal and often iterative; he makes us experience experience. Viewed through a lens fashioned by James, we can consider Stevens’ impassioned and pained poem a confrontation with the complexities and paradoxes within again.

The quality of “Sea Surface Full of Clouds” (CP 98–102) as lyrical incantation begins with the exact repetition of the first line, which starts all five stanzas, “In that November off Tehuantepec.” The second line too—“The slopping of the sea grew still one night”—is the same for three stanzas, after which Stevens shuffles its words slightly. In all five stanzas, the third through the seventh lines consistently refer to the deck, the chocolate, the umbrellas, the green water, and the machine of the ocean. The remainder of the poem dwells anagrammatically on the clouds, heaven, and the blooms. These repeated words, echoing over and over, weave together into a soporific, sonorous chant. Their repetition gives a feeling of sameness: every day is a day in November, in equatorial Tehuantepec, on the same boat, on the same sea. Stevens wakes up in the same circumstances, surrounded—indeed, haunted—by the same images.

All this sameness, however, is not monotony. Even if the sun rises again each morning, it is a new day. The light on the deck when Stevens looks at it is different each time he looks—“summer hued,” “jelly yellow,” “pale silver,” “mallow,” and “bowing and voluble” (lines 3, 21, 39, 57, 75). While several of these descriptions are reality-based, such as “summer hued” and “pale silver,” the others—“mallow” and “bowing and voluble”—are hardly representational. Similarly, the green of the ocean is “Paradisal,” “sham-like,” “uncertain,” “too-fluent,” and “motley” (lines 5, 23, 41, 59, 77). The ocean itself, the “machine” as he tropes it, is by turns “perplexed,” “tense,” “tranced,” “dry,” and “obese” (lines 6, 24, 42, 60, 78). Is the ocean ever dry?

Stevens seems less interested in the actual colors of the light and the water and the textures of the ocean than in showing us the objects as they change in his eyes, in the eyes of the beholder. So even as the objects remain themselves, Stevens’ take on them reflects his mood and his mind more than their reality. Of course, this is what poets are supposed to do. It is true of all of us, however, in the most prosaic way, as James writes: “whilst part of what we perceive comes through our senses from the object before us, another part (and it may be the larger part) always comes . . . out of our own head” (747).

But it is not just that Stevens views objects subjectively; rather, their very essence “evolve[s]” (9) as they recur in his life. James provides an
explanation that is particularly illuminative for a repetitious writer like Stevens. James writes, “When the identical fact recurs, we must think of it in a fresh manner. . . . [H]owever we might in ordinary conversation speak of getting the same sensation again, we never in strict theoretic accuracy could do so” (227). Stevens’ unique mutating perception is explained by experience and the paradoxical nature of again. “For an identical sensation to recur it would have to occur the second time in an unmodified brain. But as this, strictly speaking, is a physiological impossibility, so is an unmodified feeling an impossibility,” James writes (227). “Experience is remoulding us every moment. . . . It is out of the question, then, that any total brain-state should identically recur” (228). The same is true of its concomitant perceptions and sensations.

In other words, experience inevitably alters perception, which is thus a result of experience. “[I]t is really difficult,” writes James, “to decide how much of our sense of the object is due to reproductions of past experience” (725). In other words, we never really see an object objectively. An object is but a theme, and, over time, with experience, we play variations on it. Deleuze similarly notes the difference between, on the one hand, the “superficial repetition of the identical and instantaneous external elements” and, on the other, their contextualization within an internal “always variable past” (287).

This is why Stevens never sees the same thing twice. When he focuses on the objects that accompany him each day—the deck, the ocean, its green—they are irrevocably different because of his experiences during the intervening 24 hours of existence. Appropriately enough, we do not know what these experiences were; we are witness only to the external, to his varying surfaces. We can only read about his perceptions blooming this way and that as the unseen depths and meanings below change with experience, as he identifies on the basis of his varying past each object as it passes into his present vision. What is key to the same/differing object is the awareness of the person meeting it again. As Deleuze writes, “The question whether the first time escapes repetition (in which case it is referred to as ‘once and for all’), or, on the contrary, is repeated . . . depends entirely upon the reflection of an observer. The first time being regarded as the Same, the question is asked whether the second displays sufficient resemblance with the first to be identified as the Same again” (294). The again of the external world is met by an ever-changing mind.

Experience need not be intense for change to occur. Time is, almost by definition, experience. Time, in fact, is a kind of cognitive intervention, an element that changes us just as wind or water or fire changes objects. We are amazed when we return to the places of childhood and find, say, that the boulder we arduously scaled is as amenable as a park bench. We find that the object is the same, but different as well, because we are different. Time has intervened between the agains, destroying the possibility of identicality, even the identicality of an object with itself.
What is true of objects is true of experiences, which can undergo complete reversals in meaning. Take, for example, getting married a second time. Most of us, on marrying for the first time, assume that the marriage will endure. We wed with faith at the outset and wholehearted goodwill. Should we divorce, do we remarry with faith and wholehearted goodwill again? I think hopeful trepidation, uncertainty about success, and a determination motivated by doubt better describe the feelings of the second experience. Very few of the original sensations and emotions are repeated. Climbing Mt. Everest presents a similar reversal. The first time, a mountaineer is, in all likelihood, filled with hopeful trepidation at the outset, uncertain of success, full of a determination motivated by doubt. But should our climber gain the peak, with what feelings will she ascend the second time? Faith and wholeheartedness. Few of the original emotions are repeated, though superficially, of course, the action is performed again. In each of these two examples, the very different feelings that accompany the again are reversed.

James finds that a reversal in responses is at the physiological heart of the difference between a first time and a recurrence. In a six-page explanation in *Principles*, he writes, “On the movement’s original occurrence the motor discharge came first and the sensory process second; now in the voluntary repetition the sensory process... comes first, and the motor discharge comes second” (1183). Although this may seem to address only mechanical responses, the passage is in the section “The Education of the Will,” which ends with the example of the baby who sees a lit candle for the first time, reaches out to touch it, and is burned. On seeing a flame again, the baby withdraws, experience dictating the opposite—quite literally opposite—reaction (1192). The candle now means not attractive mystery but pain. James intends a simple explanation of the fundamentals of complex phenomena; he means to generalize from the motor to the mental, in the parsimonious fashion of the scientist and the monist tradition of the philosopher.

What James says about this reversing aspect of repetition is mirrored in Stevens’ poem. In “Sea Surface Full of Clouds” things transmute into their opposites between the first and second time we see them. The “rosy chocolate” (line 4), which sounds luscious, is the next time “chop-house” (line 22) stuff, cheap. The “gilt umbrellas” (line 5) degenerate by becoming “sham” (line 23). In these cases, what is good becomes corrupted, ruined. The “white blooms” (line 44) of stanza III transform into black petals (line 50). Are they white if they are black? Is either state a true state, an objective state? Are not both real, albeit at different moments? They are indeed—as consecutive image and retinal afterimage. Stare hard at something, then close your eyes; it is visible in reverse on the inside of your eyelids. The first image causes its opposite. Addressing the afterimage, James confesses, “We shall probably never know just what part retinal after-images play in determining the train of our thoughts. Judging by my own experiences I
should suspect it of being not insignificant” (729). Stevens, for one, seems to be noticing afterimages, as when his white blooms become black; he seems to feel similar phenomena.

This physiological precedent for things leading to their opposites has parallels in experience, as Stevens shows. Everything, in fact, is potentially transmutable into its opposite, as when Stevens reconceives the flat ocean as blooming land, for example. All objects and sensations exist on the Möbius strip of experience, of perception as it happens over time. If wisdom has a physiological basis, as one of Freud’s friends believed (21), then so too does thinking, and so does effective poetry. Perhaps this poem is so addictive and feels so wonderful because it linguistically (and thus mentally) models for us the sensory world in which we live, in which we receive stimuli, in which we think.

Stevens does not tell us in the poem what experiences change his perceptions, make his white objects black and his ocean dry, but we witness the changes in the writing, and we infer the all-too-obviously painful experiences. This is, after all, a poem with *surface* in the title. The poem is about the surface of something quite deep, and we do not see what is under that surface. We see the changes on the surface in those blooms, and we see Stevens’ changes only through his subjective, shifting perceptions. The entire poem may be understood as a metaphor about not knowing what is hidden, about having only clues.

The unknown operates in the poem in another way as well. James writes, “[H]ow inveterate is our habit of not attending to sensations as subjective facts, but of simply using them as stepping stones to pass over to the recognition of the realities whose presence they reveal” (225). Stevens permits us no such stepping over. When he literally focuses on the surface, and his language and imagery focus on the sensory, he forces us to attend to “sensations as subjective facts.” Indeed, they are our only facts, in contrast to the process James describes. Giving no personal information in the poem, Stevens never allows us to go deeper into his “realities,” whatever they may be, indicated by the changing sensations, changing perceptions, changing objects. He stops us before we can step over to reality. We are stuck in the sensory, on the surface. We are stuck with subjective facts. This intensifies the sensory, sensual, and ultimately surreal quality of the poem.

To return to the matter of reversals: if the poem refers to the conceiving of Stevens’ only child, as Stevens’ biographer Joan Richardson has argued (60), we might muse on the fact that sexual intercourse is the ultimate reversing phenomenon. Rising physical tension culminates in the opposite of tension—orgasm and relaxation; the blood itself reverses direction, first flowing into, then out of the primary sexual organs. And there is another reversal in procreative sex: the hedonistic pleasure of a moment becomes, through conception and birth, the moral responsibility of a child. Of course, it is equally likely that the opposite reversal takes places in
Stevens and in the poem: if the joyous ending of the poem is a reference to the creation of a new human being, the “freshest blue” (line 90), then an atypical and emotionally fruitless moment of physical union between the perennially estranged Stevens and his wife results in the strongest, most ordinary, and most enduring of bonds—that of the parent and child. Or, put another way: every action has an opposite and equal reaction.

Love also has dualistic conundrums. In the last stanza, when “the sea / And heaven rolled as one” “from the two” come “fresh transfigurings of freshest blue.” If the poem is a record of a rare moment of unity in the balkanized Stevens marriage, we may ask: are sky and sea two or one? They rolled as one here, though in general we are pleased to say, as Stevens quickly says, they are two. But a pair is both two things and one thing. And in the matter of love, as the rock group The Who pointed out more than a quarter of a century ago, “One and one make one” (Townsend 129). Freud likewise points out that Eros’ purpose is “making one out of more than one” (65). To ask if a couple is two or one is like asking about the quarks of quantum mechanics, which may exist in two places, as two entities, at once. Or as one entity—the answer differs, depending on the moment.

Likewise, we have the “rising . . . clouds” of stanza II that “strode submerged” in the ocean. Are the clouds in the sky or the sea? Who is to decide which are the real clouds—Stevens would never leave such a matter in the hands of conventional linguistic usage—or where the clouds really are. (The sea clouds do exist; the child created them, Stevens tells us in the first stanza.) They are both places at once, Stevens seems to assert. Opposites happen many times, many ways, sometimes simultaneously, sometimes sequentially, even within a single entity, but always naturally, yin and yang. In electricity and in the electron, reversing polarity is normal; oscillation between opposite poles is constant, as, for example, in our cells. We are, literally, Whitman’s body electric. Poetry that accurately records perception will inevitably show polarity within unity, within an entity. Moreover, by evoking the familiar feeling of polarity, perceptually mimetic poetry instills itself into our minds; perhaps this is why when we read a poem for the first time, it can stimulate déjà vu.

Yet we must never forget that perception is not only dualistic but tricky—“It must be visible or invisible, / Invisible or visible or both” (CP 385), Stevens writes in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” revealing his acquaintance with unknowability. We know that what we see is often much more complicated than what it seems. Objects in our minds (“made one think of,” as Stevens writes in each section) are multivalent and mutable, not trustworthy, accurate, or permanent. They differ, they deceive, they evolve, as everything does. Illusions are the norm. James knows this very well, devoting sixteen dense pages to perceptual illusions. Stevens knows about illusions too: “It is an illusion that we were ever alive” (CP 525), he writes
in “The Rock.” He is aware of the difference between “ideas about the thing . . . [and] the thing itself” (CP 534).

In “Sea Surface Full of Clouds” he sees “sham umbrellas” and “sham-like green” (line 23). He wonders about those who are “sure / Of the milk within the saltiest spurge” (lines 45–46). Are they sure of that milk? Is that milk real or illusory, a trick of whiteness due to “seeing silver petals of white blooms / Unfolding in the water” (lines 44–45) and assuming that that white means milk? After all, we define objects through the lens of our prior experiences. The water may appear white, but it is not milk. The ocean may be our mother, and its waters are milk to many species, but there is no direct nourishment in ocean waters for humans. Stevens’ statement about milk is thus true and false, the object in consciousness real and illusory, depending. “Representation is a site of transcendental illusion,” Deleuze writes (265), and Stevens seems to know it. When he characterizes reality for us, it is always a palimpsest; there are always other realities, other possibilities under the surface, a characterization that itself may be illusory.

Sometimes, transformations are not a matter of unknowable entities, unstable dual identities, or single repetitions causing enormous reversals. Sometimes, a transformation may be pending but hidden, accruing over time with many repetitions until finally its energy switches from potential to kinetic. The paradigmatic example is straw after straw being loaded onto a camel until eventually the straw comes that breaks the camel’s back. Again, sexual intercourse is a perfect example: so many agains become transformative. James touches on this phenomenon in a much-quoted passage by Alexander Pope:

“Sir John Cutler had a pair of black worsted stockings, which his maid darned so often with silk, that they became at last a pair of silk stockings. Now, supposing those stockings of Sir John’s endowed with some degree of consciousness at every particular darning, they would have been sensible, that they were the same individual pair of stockings both before and after the darning; and this sensation would have continued in them through all the succession of darnings; and yet after the last of all, there was not perhaps one thread left of the first pair of stockings; but they were grown to be silk stockings, as was said before.” (352 n 41)

This example about the paradoxical continuity of consciousness also serves as a study in again. What happens over time is that a difference in degree, a matter of again and again and more and more (i.e., the quantity of silk), becomes a difference of kind (the type of fabric). While the stockings remain Sir John Cutler’s selfsame stockings throughout, they are also completely different, metamorphosing from mundane wool into luxuri-
ous silk. The oldest paradoxes of Western civilization take note of the ambiguity inherent in the conceptual shift effected by quantity. There is, for example, that paradoxical bald man, who has one hair but is still bald. Should he sprout a second hair, he is still bald. Should his hair regeneration continue, when is he no longer bald? Likewise, the heap: neither one nor two grains of barley make a heap, but if that is the case, at what number does the pile of grains transform into a heap?

There is a psychological equivalent to a difference in degree becoming a difference in kind in James as well. The idea of “more and more”—the effect of accumulation—is at work when he writes, “To sustain a representation, to think, is, in short, the only moral act” (1170). The again of attending, the focus, the persistent, recursive marshaling of focus, has power in and of itself; it is able to alter the character of something. In James’s thought, an idea that one sustains grows from a mere conceptual moment into a large personal virtue because it becomes—in the ideal case, of course—understanding.

We may see this particular variant of the power of again—when a change in degree becomes a change in kind—in the development of the second line of the poem, which remains the same for three stanzas, “The slopping of the sea grew still one night. . . .” This repetition ends with a slight modification in stanza IV, when Stevens rearranges the words to “The night-long slopping of the sea grew still.” The temporal information, “one night,” becomes here an adverbial modifier for the slopping, “night-long,” and on the next repetition, the night transmutes into an agent: “Night stilled the slopping of the sea. The day / Came. . . .” (lines 74–75). It is as if Stevens played the child’s party game of telephone, with a concept as well as with words. Change has accrued slowly and invisibly during the successive repetitions, until it bursts out at the end. The night that was previously described only when the slopping stopped assumes stature as the night that actively stills the slopping. Emphasizing this dubious promotion to causality, the final word of the line in the first three stanzas, “night,” becomes its opposite, “day,” in the last stanza. (This is also another instance of reversing polarity.)

James illuminates the causation that results in stanza V from the new syntactical proximity in stanza IV of the two words “night” and “slopping.” He notes the tendency of people to infer causation from co-occurrence, from temporal proximity. He cites an author who writes: “I remember, many years ago, a white ox was brought into this country, of so enormous a size that people came many miles to see him. There happened, some months later, an uncommon fatality among women in childbearing. Two such uncommon events, following one another, gave a suspicion of their connection, and occasioned a common opinion among the country-people that the white ox was the cause of this fatality” (937–38 n 25). To a scientist, this is a cautionary tale about how essential repetition is. No scientist would deduce causation from co-occurrence without repeating.
many times an ostensible cause and effect, verifying the causation by replicating it.

Stevens offers corroboration of this point in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction”: “Perhaps, / The man-hero is not the exceptional monster, / But he that of repetition is most master” (CP 406). Repetition is essential, it is control; without it we have fallacy and killer white oxen. In great numbers, then, again has unique power, leading to truth or, in the case of Stevens’ poem, to falsehood, but always leading somewhere. In great numbers, a new hypothesis may be confirmed, an old demolished, a hero born. So, did night really still the slopping of the sea? (Or was it the child?) It does not matter. The attribution is false but all too human, with repetition providing a pretext sanctioned by scientific logic and by Stevens. The again, like a temporal juxtaposition, leads to the creation of a cause where none exists.

Our urge for causes is so strong, however, that we do not need repetition to find them, as shown in the passage about the oxen. James would have it that, our need for them notwithstanding, causes do not exist: “The word ‘cause’ is, in short, an altar to an unknown god; an empty pedestal still marking the place of a hoped-for statue” (1264). Because we need and worship causes, we fabricate them. Stevens fabricates a cause out of the night in his last stanza, and of course the poem ends when the cause of the ceasing of the slopping (night) is ascertained. Ending with discovery is natural in narrative. But if the poem’s final stanza finds a cause, so does its first. “C’était mon enfant,” Stevens writes, who “evolved the sea-blooms from the clouds / Diffusing balm in that Pacific calm.” (Note that calm should not need balm; so the appearance of calm is yet another illusion in the world of the poem.) The child is the cause, the agent of evolution.

In the first stanza, something happens to perplex the powerful ocean, something of moment, the strange stilling of the slopping. Who performed this magic trick? Why did the ocean stop moving? “C’était mon enfant.” It is not possible that the ocean should stop, yet it does, and it does so with the announcement of the child as the answer, the one who evolves the sea-blooms from the clouds, and it does so on the night of the conception (Richardson 60–68). The last stanza, with its circus and festive absurdity, its jugglery, its conch trumping, seems to be celebrating the arrival of the child, the freshest blue.

If science exploits the power of agains in great number, so too does poetry—through the technique of rhyme. Second to meter, the strategic placement of words that repeat similar sounds gives poems their lulling quality. Rhymes function as sensory allusions to previous words and as simply more—more of the same sound. As just discussed, “more” has its own weight, culminating in change. Or, as James puts it, a pathway of response “will deepen itself more and more every time it is used” (1187), and that is true of a poem’s repeated sounds, which give it a sensual impact generally
lacking in prose. “Sea Surface Full of Clouds” is built of extraordinarily hypnotic aural strength.

Stevens weaves an intricate rhyme scheme in this poem. He offers sure rhymes in some places, such as “green” and “machine,” which rhyme in the fifth and sixth lines of each stanza, and he consistently knits the French lines into the poem with a nearby rhyme. Stevens also constructs sophisticated partial rhymes such as “Tehuantepec,” “deck,” and “chocolate,” which echo each other’s phonemes; likewise in stanza I, “latitude,” “blooms,” and “hue” allude to each other aurally, though they are not exact rhymes.

Stevens gives the poem an unusual integrity by placing rhymes and repeated words at great distances throughout this long poem. For example, the “rolled” of the first stanza’s sixth verse is not rhymed again until the third stanza’s third verse, with “holds”; the sound is then repeated and rhymed in an ordinary way in the fourth stanza’s fifth and last verses, in “rolled” and “cajoled,” and it is echoed for the last time in the final stanza’s third verse, as “droll.” The same now-you-see-it, now-you-don’t use of words occurs for “blooms,” which appears once in the first verse; is part of a sequence of rhymes in the second—“blooms,” “booms,” “ocean-blooms,” and “water-glooms”; is repeated once each in the third and fourth stanzas; and is absent in the sixth. Stevens rhymes and repeats more frequently, but still erratically, “latitude,” “hue,” “blue,” and “two” throughout.

Fully twenty-two of the ninety lines end with a dominant ee sound (“green,” “machine,” “sea,” “sheen,” “leaves,” “divine” [pronounced “dee-veen” in French], etc.), and fifty-one lines end in a mere four repeated sounds—ee, ec (and “chocolate”), ue, and ooms. Thus almost half the lines end remarkably in a few sounds, but the poem does not seem monotonous, perhaps in part because of the distance of the rhymes as well as the intermittent unrhymed lines. (Many lines end in words that neither rhyme nor even allude to other sounds—“black,” “must,” “turn,” “bellowing,” and “wind” [lines 50, 65, 67, 68, 86]). These few and distant aural echoes cohere in a unique way. They cross each others’ paths like waves just offshore: new recurrences of sounds travel toward us like incoming waves, moving in concert with similar sounds departing in an aural undertow.

Perhaps because the rhymes are like waves, the poem achieves the same mesmerizing effect as the ocean. It sounds as relentless as the ocean. Each stanza is roughly the same, as waves are roughly the same, and each one, using the same sounds, goes over the same ground—November, the slopping sea, the deck, the ocean, the booms, the French, and the diverse fates of the sea clouds. But no two stanzas, like no two waves and no two snowflakes, are the same.

Perhaps indeed the poem is a virtual ocean. Certainly it has its own emotional lay, a complexly faceted foundation. Ralph Waldo Emerson in “Self-Reliance” notes “The wave moves onward, but the water of which it
is composed does not. The same particle does not rise from the valley to the ridge” (113). To read the poem is to feel like a particle in the ocean, experiencing stanzas as waves. The reader is a particle in the medium of the poem, moved in a huge movement of language and feeling, but remaining more or less the same, even while wondering, what exactly is happening around me?

Yet if the ocean makes waves, the “same” things over and over, so do machines, and it seems worth noting that Stevens’ ocean is also a “machine” manufacturing certain emotions in us over and over every time we enter it. The emotions get deeper every time we enter the poem, as in James’s pathway of response that deepens with use. It also seems worth noting that waves are currents, and the word current has the same derivation as the words occur and recur; in this way too, then, the waves of the ocean as they occur and recur are like the experiences of life as they occur and recur. It is possible that the poem compels us to enter it so often because it feels like life itself, like the feeling of feeling, like the experience of experience.

James, of course, offers to us another way in which the repetition and deceptive simplicity of the poem’s rhymes may echo experience:

> It need of course not follow, because a total brain-state does not recur, that no point of the brain can ever be twice in the same condition. That would be as improbable a consequence as that in the sea a wave-crest should never come twice at the same point of space. What can hardly come twice is an identical combination of wave-forms all with their crests and hollows reoccupying identical places. (229 n 9)

If we think of each sound, word, or idea as a point in the brain, the analogy is clear: a point in the brain, any conceptual unit small or large, may, like a point in the sea surface, be again as it once was, be again where and what it once was, but even if that should happen, to call it the same, to say it is in the same place of latitude, longitude, and altitude, is to miss the importance of its radically different matrix.

Thus at the heart of Stevens’ rhyming and at the heart of the poem, as at the heart of experience, is the self-contradictory nature of again. Repetition, as we usually and somewhat lazily think of it, does not exist. Even as his words exploit repetition, Stevens’ poetry demolishes it, leaving us with paradox. The literary critic Rosalie Colie notes that paradoxes are paradoxical—they “do two things at once, two things which contradict or cancel each other” (8). Paradox, she writes, is “primarily a figure of thought” (22), in which opposites simultaneously exist in tension with each other. From the dry ocean to the saltwater milk, to the clouds that are in the sky and sea, to that putative Pacific calm that requires balm, the images of this poem seem to war with themselves in one way or another; every entity is
at least dualistic, if not entirely duplicitous. Stevens makes meanings themselves travel like ping-pong balls in play; meanings oscillate between their poles. Like all good paradoxes, according to Deleuze, these dualities, pluralities, and reversals “cannot be equalised or cancelled at the direction of a good sense” (227). Common sense has no role in “Sea Surface Full of Clouds,” which describes a night when the ocean stops—as incredible an event as if time stopped.

Colie writes that paradox makes us aware of “how multiplex any simple truth is” (519), and this is certainly Stevens’ project as well. All his pairs of melded opposites, his doublings, and his doubles that are neither exact replicas nor permanently diametrical opposites are variants of the idea that a repetition is never simply repetitive but always full of paradox and reversal, reaction and oscillation, irreducible and rich. Again is always an oxymoron.

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Anecdotes of Stevens’ Drunken Sailor

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And any book, any essay, any note in Notes and Queries, which produces a fact even of the lowest order about a work of art is a better piece of work than nine-tenths of the most pretentious critical journalism, in journals or in books.

—T. S. Eliot, “The Function of Criticism”

While he insists in “Man Carrying Thing,” “The poem must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully,” Wallace Stevens grants at the same time that the work as a whole may be “obvious.” The resistance lies in particular details, which are “secondary,” he notes, “parts not quite perceived / Of the obvious whole” (CP 350–51). His figure for the poem’s obvious whole is a man carrying a thing; who he is and what he carries are the “secondary things,” “uncertain particles / Of the certain solid.” The uncertain particles of the poem may never reveal themselves to the intellect but that is of little concern, the poem implies; what matters is the certain solid, one’s sense of the whole. In these terms “Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock” is not one of Stevens’ more difficult poems. “Any schoolboy (of the superior Macaulayish breed) more or less feels what this poem means” (137), Randall Jarrell has written. Its obvious whole is its speaker’s sense of a pervasive conformity and imaginative poverty, suggested by the plain “white night-gowns” haunting the houses at bedtime set against the vivid colors and strange adornments that will not be worn, the exotic animals that will not appear in dreams. The colors and animals do, however, appear in the poem, which thus imagines the absence of imagination, and its speaker’s disillusionment is mitigated in the end by one of the rare exceptions to the general tedium:

Only, here and there, an old sailor,
Drunk and asleep in his boots,
Catches tigers
In red weather. (CP 66)

It is the drunken sailor catching tigers in red weather, one of the most widely known figures of Stevens’ early poetry, that qualifies as a part “not quite perceived / Of the obvious whole.” Indeed, the figure has so suc-
cessfully resisted the intelligence that it has sometimes been cited as an example of Stevens’ nonsense.

It was first labeled nonsense in the most influential of the early essays on Stevens’ poetry, R. P. Blackmur’s “Examples of Wallace Stevens.”

Blackmur, in discussing the ambiguity of Stevens’ language, quotes the ending of “Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock” as an “actual entrance into nonsense”:

The statement about catching tigers in red weather coming after the white nightgowns and baboons and periwinkles, has a persuasive force out of all relation to the sense of the words. Literally, there is nothing alarming in the statement, and nothing ambiguous, but by so putting the statement that it appears as nonsense, infinite possibilities are made terrifying and plain. The shock and virtue of nonsense is this: it compels us to scrutinize the words in such a way that we see enormous ambiguity in the substance of every phrase, every image, every word. The simpler the words are the more impressive and certain is the ambiguity. Half our sleeping knowledge is in nonsense; and when put in a poem it wakes. (100–01)

Blackmur’s examples of this and other difficulties in Stevens lead him to a comparison of the different types of obscurity found in three modern poets: Pound, Eliot, and Stevens. Pound’s and Eliot’s obscurities, he notes, lie in classical and historical references, past literatures, beliefs and systems of thought the reader does not know. In contrast, “Mr. Stevens’ difficulties to the normal reader present themselves in the shape of seemingly impenetrable words or phrases which no wedge of knowledge brought from outside the body of Mr. Stevens’ own poetry can help much to split” (113–14). By this account, Stevens’ drunken sailor catching tigers in red weather is not merely an approximation of nonsense, but unlike, say, Eliot’s Fisher King or Tiresias, or the arcane Andreas Divus of Pound’s first canto, he and his dream cannot be explained by any information the reader might uncover outside the poem.

The great influence of Blackmur’s essay no doubt contributed to the reputation “Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock” acquired as a “nonsense” poem. Jarrell notes in a 1951 essay that it is “ordinarily considered a rather nonsensical and Learish poem” (138), and thirty years later Margaret Peterson observes that it is “often cited by critics who stress the nonsensical or eccentric elements of Stevens’ style” (105). One such critic, James Rother, cites the poem in an essay titled “Wallace Stevens as a Nonsense Poet” but decides that it does not quite fit the category of classical nonsense, which he defines in terms of the works of Carroll and Lear (81–82). John Newcomb, who has examined Blackmur’s reading of Stevens in Wallace Stevens and Literary Canons, points out that Stevens’ designation as
a nonsense poet—which existed before Blackmur’s essay—had been damaging to his reputation and that Blackmur’s contribution was to revise the concept by showing two types of nonsense in Stevens, apparent and real. In some poems the nonsense was “only a surface beneath which a vein of satisfying meaning lay.” In others, however, the nonsense “simply would not disclose itself as conventional meaning.” At times, as in “Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock,” the poetry exhibited a “more radical kind of nonsense-meaning” (93–94).

Of course not all readings of the poem make their appeal to nonsense, but even readers who do not evoke the issue often find the poem’s conclusion inexplicable or troubling. Milton Bates alludes to the sailor’s “red weather,” then ponders, “Whatever red weather may be (hot? stormy?)” (104). Robert Buttel finds the world of the old sailor “irrational” and suggests that he represents an “imaginative violence” set against the “regularity and order of the literal-minded” (179). Howard Baker very early speculated that the concluding image is “a product of the obscurer depths of consciousness, interesting in itself but nonsignificant” (88).

Against these and other comparable readings I want to suggest that there is evidence (or at least testimony) that Stevens’ drunken sailor catching tigers in red weather is neither nonsignificant nor nonsense. The image is not, finally, irrational, nor is it a product of the obscure depths of consciousness. Both the red weather and the tigers are explicable, contrary to Blackmur’s view, in terms of knowledge brought from outside the body of Stevens’ poetry. The difficulty in the lines, if I am right, has less to do with Stevens’ attempt to approximate nonsense or absurdity than with his quirky conceptions of the language of poetry and the relationship of poet and reader.

To demonstrate the (understandable) error of earlier readings, including my own, I must begin with a personal anecdote. The last time I assigned “Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock” in an undergraduate course a student, Walter, who had remained silent during the discussion, approached me after class to say that he had personal knowledge of the poem. He was from Connecticut, and his aunt, now deceased, had lived in Hartford. She had once met Wallace Stevens and the story had apparently become a part of family lore. She had asked him about the sailor who catches tigers in red weather, which had always puzzled her, and Stevens had replied that he catches tiger sharks in fine weather. Aha, tiger sharks, I thought, and I asked Walter if he would come by my office after the term was over, for only a couple of weeks remained. I wanted to get more details, names and dates. He assured me that he would, but of course, youth being what it is, he never appeared and I was unable to locate him. I assumed that he did not return for the spring semester. So the story does not even attain the level of oral history; it is no more than an anecdote (Greek anekdotae, private or unpublished items), a bit of literary gossip against which countless objections could be raised. Perhaps the aunt’s memory was faulty, or
the story got embellished over the years, or the nephew got the story wrong or made it up, or I got it wrong or made up the whole thing including the nephew, or Stevens was disingenuous in his explanation. Or, it might even be objected, although the story may be essentially correct as I report it, it is irrelevant to our reading of the poem, which is derived from the words on the page. To suggest that Stevens’ alleged explanation puts an end to the matter is to be guilty of some contemporary version of the intentional fallacy, granting the writer the final word, which Stevens himself found questionable.2

I have some sympathy with these objections, including the privileging of the poet’s own explanation of his lines, so I will relinquish any claim of authenticity in regard to my student’s anecdote and instead argue the case on its merits. That is, no matter the source of the explication, there are good reasons for believing that the final two lines of the poem, “Catches tigers / In red weather,” should be paraphrased “catches tiger sharks in fine weather.” It is quite common to refer to tiger sharks simply as “tigers,”3 as in “Tigers are voracious feeders, swallowing anything that drops into the sea whether it is digestible or not” (Burgess 58), or “The big tiger was hauled up and the net easily shaken off; then the boom swung the tiger across the stern of the boat and dropped it on top of the pile of rays and sharks from the other three nets” (Cropp 80). In a different context, a reference to a sailor who dreams of catching tigers would be immediately intelligible, and the fact that it is a sailor who dreams of an activity that takes place at sea argues for this interpretation. It was placing a sailor in the jungle catching real tigers (and does one catch tigers, as opposed to trapping or shooting them?) that led readers to see the figure as absurd or nonsensical.

The “red weather” also contributed, but to read that as fine weather requires no more than bringing to the surface the proverbial intertext that yields its significance: “Red skies at night, / Sailors’ delight.” Stevens’ sailor apparently dreams of fishing for tigers under the red skies of early evening, when, in fact, tiger sharks would be most easily caught. Shark expert Stewart Springer is quoted in The Natural History of Sharks: “‘Tiger sharks are not often seen in daylight, but they readily attack surface baits at night’” (68). The poem requires the red skies to be set against the white nightgowns, since it has earlier established a correlation between vivid colors and imaginative acts. It has also associated the imagination with what people dream of and what they wear. The sailor’s unconventional boots are set against the absence of “socks of lace / And beaded ceintures” in the ten o’clock houses, and his drunkenness puts him at odds with the prim and conformist wearers of white nightgowns, retiring regularly at ten o’clock. The tiger sharks of his dream round out the pattern of exotic creatures—“baboons and periwinkles”—identified with imaginative dreams. The plural form suggests that the periwinkles here are marine snails rather than plants, and Stevens appears to have chosen both the
baboons and the periwinkles as much for the imaginative sounds of their names as for any other reason. Tiger sharks, on the other hand, possess one characteristic that integrates them with the poem’s figuration. Imagination (and nonconformity, with which it is associated in the poem) are closely tied to adornment, rings of color (“purple with green rings, / Or green with yellow rings, / Or yellow with blue rings”) in addition to the socks of lace and beaded ceintures. Tiger sharks acquired their names because of the stripes of color that mark their otherwise gray flanks (Lineaweaver 66). With their vertical bars and spots they are to their generally drab gray or white cousins what colorful embellished nightgowns are to white ones. But that is perhaps to load Stevens’ tigers with more significance than they can reasonably bear. It is enough to say that a dream of catching tiger sharks in fine weather resolves itself easily into the poem’s context and figuration and makes sense of what has been seen as nonsense.

“Man Carrying Thing,” to return to where we began, is not an argument for nonsense, nor for “undecidability” in the current jargon, since it assumes that the man and the thing he carries are potentially identifiable. In its last lines the initially unreadable details of a poem become the first flakes of snow that trouble our thoughts during a winter night, and the implication of its conclusion is that their portent eventually may be understood through a process of accumulation. The poem ends, “We must endure our thoughts all night, until / The bright obvious stands motionless in cold” (CP 351).

Stevens almost certainly read the essay in which Blackmur represents “Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock” as an “entrance into nonsense” (see L 261), and, if Walter and I are right about his tigers, he must have recognized that Blackmur’s characterization was based in part on a simple confusion about the kind of tigers the old sailor dreams of catching. The fact that he apparently allowed Blackmur’s confusion to stand is entirely consistent with his view of poetic language and poetry readers. Writing to Henry Church about a French translation of “Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock,” Stevens said he preferred cercles to ronds for his rings, “because there is something tame about ronds.” And he added, “Personally, I like words to sound wrong” (L 340). Holding such a view, he would not have been concerned that his words sounded like nonsense to Blackmur as long as he knew himself that they were not. He told one puzzled reader that it was not necessary that the reader understood his poetry. What was necessary, he said, was that he himself understood it (Brazeau 43). However it sounds to the reader, it cannot be nonsense.

Furthermore, in Stevens’ view, to have explained the poem’s conclusion would have constituted robbing it of its power. “I have the greatest dislike for explanations,” he wrote in 1935. “As soon as people are perfectly sure of a poem they are just as likely as not to have no further interest in it; it loses whatever potency it had” (L 294). Perhaps the justice of
this remark is illustrated by a final anecdote about “Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock.” I recently related Walter’s story of his aunt and Wallace Stevens to a group of graduate students. I offered the revised reading and suggested that quite likely here was an example of a well-known passage of poetry universally misunderstood in its most fundamental details.5 A student who knew the poem was frowning, I noticed, and I paused for her response. “It sounds right,” she said of the amended reading, “and it ruins the poem for me.”

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Notes

1 The essay first appeared in 1932 in Hound and Horn, and has been reprinted several times, most recently in Wallace Stevens: The Critical Heritage, from which I quote.

2 Stevens wrote to Hi Simons in 1940, “I think that the critic is under obligation to base his remarks on what he has before him. It is not a question of what an author meant to say but of what he has said. In the case of a competent critic the author may well have a great deal to find out about himself and his work. This goes to the extent of saying that it would be legitimate for a critic to make statements respecting the purpose of an author’s work that were altogether contrary to the intentions of the author” (L 346).

3 A parallel ellipsis occurs in “The Emperor of Ice-Cream” when “fantails” is used for “fantail pigeons.”

4 Stevens was familiar with Blackmur’s criticism and discussed it in general terms several times in his letters, although he never disputed Blackmur’s readings nor mentioned Blackmur’s analyses of his poems. He wrote at one point,

    Blackmur is immeasurably superior to [Yvor Winters]. I don’t mean to say that he is any more intelligent, or any more sensitive, but he is more sensible, less eccentric. There is, however, a serious defect in Blackmur, or so it seems to me, and that is that it takes him twenty-five pages to say what would be much better said if said in one. The result is that, after you have finished twenty-five pages of Blackmur, you haven’t the faintest idea what he has been talking about. (L 484)

5 I am making a distinction between poststructuralist misreading, the assumption that, for a variety of reasons, all reading is inevitably misreading, and “weak” misreading—Harold Bloom’s term—a correctable misreading in which, for example, a reader misunderstands some reference or other grammatical or semantic element of a passage.

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“Receding Shores That Never Touch with Inarticulate Pang”: Stevens and the Language of Touch

CAROLYN MASEL

The organ of touch proper consists of earth, and the faculty of taste is a particular form of touch. This explains why the sensory organ of both touch and taste is closely related to the heart. For the heart as being the hottest of all the bodily parts, is the counterpoise of the brain.

—Aristotle, On Sense and the Sensible

The hot of him is purest in the heart.

—Stevens, “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction”

I

AT SOME POINT IN ONE’S reading of Wallace Stevens, one becomes aware of a distinctive pattern concerning the language of touch, which a consultation of the Concordance will confirm. In a literal sense—the sense of body part meeting body part—there is virtually no contact: it is the mind that grasps, seizes, holds and, like a sixth sense, generally seeks to touch all over. On the other hand (so to speak), actual physical touch becomes metaphorical, attenuated, dephysicalized—but without losing its sensual freight. Arguably, in his reluctance to employ, except very selectively, a language of physical contact, Stevens would seem to subscribe to Aristotle’s hierarchy of the senses, whereby sight and hearing, the higher or cognitive senses that inform the soul, are valued over smell, taste, and touch. Perhaps he even follows Aristotle in privileging hearing above sight, since he refers repeatedly to the reading of poetry as an uncanny kind of listening (for example, in “The Reader” and “Large Red Man Reading”) or a special kind of speaking (the “speech we do not speak” [CP 311] of “The Creations of Sound”). Stevens’ frequent use of the Paterian analogy of poetry and music (for example, in “Peter Quince at the Clavier” and “Mozart, 1935”) also suggests a model of poetry as a performance to be listened to. Although Stevens’ valorization of what Helen Vendler has called the “theoretical” senses (42) may be Aristotelian
only by coincidence (Aristotle’s hierarchy is, after all, a commonplace of Western thought), the links that Aristotle makes between touch and earth and the heart in his scheme of the senses have a particular resonance for readers of Stevens, a poet as impelled by the rhythms of desire as he is bound by an inner necessity to resist the escapism of transcendence.

I want to begin by suggesting that the particular pattern of Stevens’ language of touch includes, but resonates more widely than, the issue of eroticism and Stevens’ public renunciation of eros in the poems at the beginning of Ideas of Order. Indeed, it shall be seen that, in contrast to the dramatic development of Stevens from a poet of eros into a poet beyond the pleasure principle, the larger pattern I am outlining is remarkably consistent throughout Stevens’ career and it may thus be thought of as an index to his fundamental temperament.

It should also be clear from the start that issues raised by Stevens’ use of touch are moral as well as conceptual. While Vendler (1984) and others have argued that Stevens is, above all, a poet of deep emotion, debate continues to occur (and sometimes rage) about what kinds of emotions his work evinces and about the ethics of his relations with others and with the world at large. The debate is a long-standing one. In the mid-1980s Gerald Bruns saw “what to do about other people” (26–27) as Stevens’ central problem, modifying Hugh Kenner’s earlier remark that there are no people in Stevens’ poetry (75). Bruns asserts instead that Stevens’ people never talk back, from whence he proceeded to charge Stevens with an authoritarian monologism at odds with the democratic ethos of modern American poetry’s heteroglossia. More recently, Mark Halliday has contended that Stevens neglects the interpersonal and thereby excludes “a vast dimension of our lives” (8). John Dolan, explicitly countering that charge, insists that Stevens dramatizes “the simultaneous fear of, and longing for, ‘warmth,’ ‘journalism,’ and the mundane world of other people” (173).

There is something curiously literal about some of these criticisms that, in seeking to show the poems’ sources in aspects of Stevens’ lived experience (and hence to claim for him a common human warmth), can seem also to normalize what Stevens deliberately rendered oblique or concealed behind such highly polished surfaces.¹ No matter how much biographical and historical information is brought to bear on Stevens’ work, he can never be made to appear to write like, for example, his antithesis or Yeatsian mask, the Robert Lowell of Life Studies and after.² Thus, one of the reasons one welcomes such approaches to poetry as Jonathan Culler’s or John Hollander’s and such approaches to Stevens as Vendler’s in her essay on Stevens and magnitude or Michael Beehler’s in his essay on “Penelope’s Experience . . .” is that they demonstrate how a poet of solitude (or a solitary character in a poem) can sustain a dialogic relation to another or to the actual world—the world that includes somewhere in all its chaos, somewhere among the detritus of history, the beloved poems of others and one’s own old work.
The intimate connection between touch and emotion is summed up by the double sense of the word “feeling.” It would seem that Stevens partly undoes one aspect of the word, generally the sensory aspect, without losing the emotional aspect. Since touch is one mode of apprehending the world, of mediating the self’s experience of the world, the language of touch is very much the language of boundaries. More precisely, it is the language of boundaries that are not boundaries, since contact is what gives the lie to the subject’s self-sufficient enclosure. Even in the self-reflexive case of the body’s contact with itself (e.g., Penelope’s combing her hair), so intimate and so habitual as to be indistinguishable from subjectivity, there is arguably an element of the residual otherness of the world-as-body. Thus, subjectivity itself is periodically reminded of its own haecceity.

II

The logical place to begin our investigation of the characteristic reversal of expectations in Stevens’ use of the language of touch is to look at some obvious examples, words such as “kiss,” “touch,” “hold,” and “embrace.” The Concordance gives five instances of kiss/kissed/kissing. More often than not, kisses turn out to be comical. Any command to cats is likely to be a trope of the ineffectual, but the invitation to them to kiss (“Kiss, cats” [CP 210]) in “Loneliness in Jersey City” seems particularly ludicrous. In Stevens’ vision of emptiness, all differences, especially those between contraries, dissolve into meaningless harmony; in such conditions disputatious cats might as well kiss and make up. For my purposes here, we should note not only the triviality, but also the grammar. “Kiss” is merely an idea of kissing: no cats kiss in this nonce poem, a waltz-time variation on the theme of “The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad,” especially the version of that poem in which winter and summer are equally ennuyant.

My next example comes from “Repetitions of a Young Captain,” V, in which Stevens interrogates “the real,” classifying it according to a somewhat parodic version of the Trinity. Here, Stevens writes “The bride come[s] jingling, kissed and cupped” (CP 308)—trivialized, sentimentalized, and too completely prepared to be wholly credible. The kissing, we note, is in the past. The heroine of “Lulu Gay” was memorably kissed by wide-mouthed barbarians; the poem’s narrative, however, is concerned with her later description of that event because it titillates her audience of eunuchs. Their potential for kissing is not likely to be enhanced by hearing Lulu’s story in all its sticky literalness (their “breaths as true / As the gum of the gum-tree” [OP 45]), however appreciatively they may ululate in response.

In a more serious lyrical vein, in “The Auroras of Autumn,” III, the mother’s necklace is “a carving not a kiss” (CP 413), an utterance that reifies the maternal peace-giving presence, preparatory to her being ceremonially laid to rest. Once again, a kiss is only a memory of love that is marked as loss in the aged maternal totem. The last instance of “kisses”
occurs in “Two at Norfolk,” the last two stanzas of which are full of the vocabulary of touch, but which, with characteristic ambiguity, manage to evade any certainty whatsoever about whether any intimacy occurs:

The dark shadows of the funereal magnolias
Are full of the songs of Jamanda and Carlotta;
The son and the daughter, who come to the darkness,
He for her burning breast and she for his arms.

And these two never meet in the air so full of summer
And touch each other, even touching closely,
Without an escape in the lapses of their kisses.
Make a bed and leave the iris in it. (CP 111–12)

This is a good example of Stevens as performance artist. The ambiguity here is cumulative, the sense complicating with each unfolding line. At the end of the poem we are still unsure whether Jamanda and Carlotta are alive or dead. (Paolo and Francesca are spectral presences, and so is the Keats of the Grecian Urn.) The lapses are both kisses and the cessation of kisses (despite multiple impulses to kiss). These are Schrödinger’s Lovers and those are Schrödinger’s Kisses. Not even Stevens can ascertain the degree of their intimacy: the iris is there as much for vigilance (iris of the eye) as for a floral symbol of romance; the derivation of the word “iris” (the Greek for “rainbow”) only confirms that ambiguity, suggesting at once a promise, or a contract, or jouissance.

One immediate effect of Stevens’ dephysicalization of the body and sensualizing of the mind is to destabilize our whole conception of the tactile, so that anyone attempting to characterize that pattern must decide just which words properly belong to the vocabulary of touch. We meet this difficulty head on when looking at Stevens’ use of “touch” itself. The seventy-four instances of “touch” and its associated formations “touched,” “touches,” and “touchless” listed in the Concordance tell us this is a significant word in his lexicon. As we would expect, no usage of any of these words is identical to any other. Yet some characteristics do emerge in Stevens’ usage of these words overall. In describing this pattern, however, I need to state from the outset that there is a significant group of exceptions to it that I shall discuss later and that they are exceptions because they conform to another, overriding pattern.

It is generally the case, however, that touch is rarely if ever a matter of simple physical contact between two or more people. With a single exception, it is not even a matter of physical contact between a fully human subject and an object. For the most part, the sense of touch is abstracted in much the same way that I have described the word “feeling,” with the emotional freight far outweighing the tactile one, as in Crispin’s “bluet-eyed” chits’ “Hands without touch yet touching poignantly” (CP 43). “Touch” is often used metaphorically, even metaphysically, signifying a
human contact with something beyond the human; however, insofar as it is usually the something-beyond that touches the human, the sense is that of a mystery received rather than the merely human transcended:

The shadow touched
Or merely seemed to touch him as he spoke
A kind of elegy he found in space. . . .
(“Esthétique du Mal” [CP 315])

Touched suddenly by the universal flare
For a moment, a moment in which we read and repeat
The eloquences of light’s faculties.
(“The Pure Good of Theory” [CP 333])

Was it as we sat in the park and the archaic form
Of a woman with a cloud on her shoulder rose
Against the trees and then against the sky
And the sense of the archaic touched us at once
In a movement of the outlines of similarity?
(“Things of August” [CP 494])

There is a certain amount of touching associated with musical instruments; again, the predominant sense is not of the physicality involved in playing an instrument, but rather of music’s capacity to move us:

Susanna’s music touched the bawdy strings
Of those white elders. . . .
(“Peter Quince at the Clavier” [CP 92])

A dream no longer a dream, a thing,
Of things as they are, as the blue guitar

After long strumming on certain nights
Gives the touch of the senses, not of the hand,

But the very senses as they touch
The wind-gloss.
(“The Man with the Blue Guitar” [CP 174–75])

After reading poem upon poem in which touch is abstracted, metaphorical, inhuman, or affected by or with an allegorical figure, to come upon “A Dish of Peaches in Russia,” with its forthright beginning, is to encounter the poem in its full, exotic sensuality:

With my whole body I taste these peaches,
I touch them and smell them. . . . (CP 224)
The rest of the poem proceeds to problematize that first uncomplicated claim. Its central thesis turns out to be the impossible marriage of self and object, because of the inability of the self to be wholly present in any experience. Language itself, of course, militates against complete self-presence; the difference between “the Angevine” and “Anjou” is sufficient to point the fault line. Even as the peaches’ immediate delectability is dramatized (“The peaches are large and round, / Ah! and red; and they have peach fuzz, ah!”), it is evident that the naming of their attributes (“They are full of juice and the skin is soft” [CP 224]) detracts from them as pure experience. Language is the unconsumable residue of the peaches’ being consumed. The pleasant associations that they evoke end up being precisely those that define the Russian as an exile nostalgic for his village and hence divided, in his present pleasure, in himself.

“Arrival at the Waldorf” plays out the same idea in reverse. To return to the familiar hotel is, the speaker thinks, to arrive “in the wild country of the soul / All approaches gone, being completely there” (CP 240). Yet he soon discovers that that is not possible. It is the undermining of the immediacy of the sense of touch that first signals the undoing of total presentness: “You touch the hotel the way you touch moonlight / Or sunlight.” This process of analogy, so vital to the “wild poem” of desire, turns out to be dangerous. After having arrived home from Guatemala, after having summed up “ ‘The world in a verse,’ ” designed to seal oneself off from human relationships and Guatemalan foreignness, Stevens’ poetic defense mechanisms seem to fail. He is seemingly taken over by “that alien, point-blank, green and actual Guatemala” (CP 241), which resists mediation and reveals one’s poetry as a doomed effort at displacement. Here, as in “A Dish of Peaches in Russia,” presentness is shown to be a composite experience.

In “A Clear Day and No Memories,” the poignancy of touch—even a recalled gesture of touch, even an invented gesture—is the measure of what might be lost were a condition of pure presentness possible:

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. (OP 138–39)

Conversely, to take the metaphorical freight away from touch, as happens in “Lebensweisheitspielerei,” is, for Stevens, a diminution. When “Each person completely touches us / With what he is and as he is,” the experience is one of “the stale grandeur of annihilation” (CP 505).

“Hold” and its associated forms are much less favored words, with only twenty-two instances listed. We have seen how Stevens’ undercutting of the merely sensory aspect of the language of touch tends both to heighten
the emotional loading of those particular words and also, by depriving them of sensation, to increase their sensuality, their burden of desire. In relation to “hold” and its variants, the pattern is somewhat modified. One group of poems uses the word simply to mean “possess” or “contain” (“Stars at Tallapoosa,” “Saint John and the Back-Ache,” “A Discovery of Thought”). In another group, various characters hold books (“Colloquy with a Polish Aunt,” “The Lack of Repose,” “The Novel”). In the first two instances the book is an arcane medium and to hold it, therefore, is to invite a revelation or to invoke a ghostly presence, a gesture signaling the subject’s openness rather than a token of possession. In the third, comically melodramatic, instance the book—a novel by Camus held in the black-gloved hand of a corpse—is evidence of the dangerous pursuit of reading. Also in the group are an unnamed leader “savager than the rest” who holds “the suave egg-diamond” (CP 220) of power, and some other people, deaf to memory, who sit pointlessly “holding their eyes in their hands” (CP 225).6

A third group uses “hold” to mean “hold back” or “restrain” (“Forces, the Will & the Weather,” “Mrs. Alfred Uruguay,” “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” “The Course of a Particular”). In the instance from the last numbered canto of “Notes,” the impulse to “Check your evasions, hold you to yourself” (CP 406) seems to me the opposite of an embrace and hence a symmetrical reversal of the prefatory poem’s question about “press[ing] the extremest book of the wisest man / Close to me, hidden in me day and night” (CP 380). But in two poems, Stevens does use “hold” to mean “embrace.” In “Memorandum,” where “Millions hold millions in their arms” (OP 116), the agents are, however, just as likely to be katydids as humans, as the speaker conceals his own desire amid the anonymous, depersonalized desirous mass. In the second of “Two Letters” (“A Letter To”), the holding is poignant because optative: “A land would hold her in its arms that day . . . / The circle would no longer be broken but closed. / The miles of distance away / From everything would end. It would all meet” (OP 133).

Only one poem uses “hold” as a strong word, in all its tactility. It is “Credences of Summer,” where the tantalizing but necessary gap between the self and the object that is the subject of a significant number of the poems we have looked at is explored directly as a metaphysical problem. In canto VII, Stevens moves through a series of unsatisfactory partial solutions toward an unlikely triumph. First of all, the singers have to face the difficulty of singing “in face / Of the object” (CP 376). To do this, they have to pretend that either they are or it is absent. It has to be beyond their grasp in order to generate a sufficient desire for it. But sufficient for what: for the singers to create a good song, or for them to seize the object? The first alternative is predicated on the naturalness of singers to sing (singing as ontological self-definition); hence, a good song is not only a good in itself, but also augments the singer. But the deliberate artifice with which
they “avert themselves / Or else avert the object” of their desire in order to desire it lays them open to a charge of bad faith—a predicament that Stevens would appear to recognize in his modification of their desire to be for “an object that was near, / In the face of which desire no longer moved, / Nor made of itself that which it could not find . . .” (CP 376). Thus, he gives them no choice but to seize the object, and his challenge as a poet must be to bear directly the burden of that triumph of possession:

Three times the concentrated self takes hold, three times
The thrice concentrated self, having possessed

The object, grips it in savage scrutiny,
Once to make it captive, once to subjugate
Or yield to subjugation, once to proclaim
The meaning of the capture, this hard prize,
Fully made, fully apparent, fully found. (CP 376)

My sense is that, for all the compelling display of raw power here, Stevens may not be fully at ease with the fact of possession. This savage ceremony seems not just willed, but mannered, its witchy, self-empowering incantation too self-consciously daemonic/demonic. He is, in any case, fully aware of the strength of the challenge to his poetic powers: note the deictic of “this hard prize,” and note also how thoroughly abstract is the self that “takes hold.”

My last set of instances in this section concerns the word “embrace.” No one “hugs” in Stevens’ poetry, but the Concordance lists ten instances of “embrace” and its variants. In most cases, embracing, it transpires, is wholly metaphoric. Famously, in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” “Winter and spring, cold copulars, embrace / And forth the particulars of rapture come” (CP 392). There is certainly intimacy here, but the agents are (obviously) not human. Very similarly, in “Artificial Populations,” “the Orient and the Occident embrace / To form that weather’s appropriate people” (OP 138). This is not only intimate but reproductive and people are produced, but they are the highly stylized “rosy men and the women of the rose, / Astute in being what they are made to be” who constitute the artificial population of the title. The secret man of the poem “Secret Man” has only got as far as considering the advantages of embracing the season in which he finds himself. That said, the language is remarkably physical: turning to embrace autumn means turning away from summer in an analogy that is clearly human.

The sharers of an embrace in “The Rock” also hover between the inanimate and the human, being “desperate clod[s],” but only in someone’s “fantastic consciousness” (CP 525). Even then, their embrace turns out to be only an analogy for the true significance of a luminous “meeting at noon at the edge of the field” that remains inexplicable, private, possibly ineffable. The embracing in “The Sail of Ulysses” is so abstract as to be
barely gestural. In that poem Stevens is attempting to articulate the elusive and paradoxical attributes of “The self as sibyl, whose diamond, / Whose chiefest embracing of all wealth / Is poverty, whose jewel found / At the exactest central of the earth / Is need” (OP 130). The use of “embrace” in “Examination of the Hero in a Time of War” is very similar, if less wrought, and less transcendent. Here, “The highest man with nothing higher / Than himself, his self, the self that embraces / The self of the hero . . . / Makes poems on the syllable fi” (CP 280). Embracing, in this instance, means less a reaching out for than a continuous holding; the self no longer aspires, but must sustain its qualities.

By contrast, the embracing in “Repetitions of a Young Captain” is at least human, albeit utterly public and unspontaneous. The embracing pair are actors—a “dim” one and an actress so artificial she can only be described as a “faintly encrusted . . . tissue of the moon” (CP 306). Yet, despite his “thick shape” and her ludicrousness, their art is effective; they are able to re-create a credible semblance of emotion, even if their version of love resembles entropy rather than passion. Human characters also figure in “Last Looks at the Lilacs,” which ends by predicting a passionate embrace between “the divine ingénue” and “the gold Don John” (CP 48–49). We note that this is another instance of a gesture whose immediacy is deferred, yet the romantic protagonists’ roles are such that their embrace seems fated, just as it is fated that the reservations of a superfluous speaker-as-buffo will be utterly disregarded.

Something of Don John’s brutality informs my final example, “Two Figures in Dense Violet Night,” a poem that might be read as a continuously evolving, continuously self-defining embrace. It begins, with moderately convoluted logic, by using the embrace as a figure of speech, a merely subjunctive affair: “I had as lief be embraced by the porter at the hotel / As to get no more from the moonlight / Than your moist hand” (CP 85). But the semi-comic analogy and the mock courtliness quickly darken into something more forceful, even in an extreme metaphoric reading where the addressee is nothing more than moonlight. The voice the speaker desires is so intimate as to be able to be seamlessly subsumed: “Speak, even, as if I did not hear you speaking, / But spoke for you perfectly in my thoughts” (CP 86). Eventually, even the sexual potency and gendered otherness of the addressee fall away (“Say, puerile”), until the appropriation is complete and there is no further seductiveness left in the moon’s shining.

Who, then, embraces in Wallace Stevens’ poetry? No one who is spontaneous and fully human. At best, embraces are reserved for futurity; at worst, they have a mechanical, dehumanizing kind of consequentiality. My last example above, with its graduated centripetal mechanism of appropriation, has attracted critical attention because it models, in short form, one of the prevailing strategies in Stevens’ work.7 Its appropriative strategy is identical to that of “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour” or the prefatory poem of “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction.” But it is not loving;
indeed, the transaction it seeks to effect is sinister. Its sexual economy, with its central metaphor of premeditated sexual coercion, is barely (if at all) softened by being couched in romantic language. 8

III

Thus far we have investigated Stevens’ use of words with a strong tactile sense. Given the evident aversion to representing literal contact that we have discovered, it is, I think, legitimate to wonder how Stevens might use a word that suggests a fleeting contact, a delicate touch, one not too intimidating and so perhaps even permitting elaboration. The Concordance lists eight examples of “brush” and its associated forms. In “Debris of Life and Mind,” “a bright red woman will be rising / And, standing in violent golds, will brush her hair” (CP 338). This brushing would count as touching, except that she has not done so yet: the sensuality of the gesture is not immediate but promised. The impulse here, as in other poems, is to suggest the possibility of touch while firmly preempting or deferring it. Moreover, in this instance as in many others, the woman’s status as a figure itself preempts mere physicality. As Aurora she is at least as metaphoric as physical, with an implicit analogy between her hair drawn out by the brush and a representation of the rising sun’s rays that is at once kinetic and diagrammatic. Furthermore, in that she is to brush her own hair, the deferred touch is not a matter of interpersonal contact; her function is as a visual object for an eroticized gaze.

A later poem, “The Woman in Sunshine,” reworks that imagery in a way that does suggest interpersonal contact, for the “warmth and movement” of sunshine suggest “a woman in threadless gold” who “Burns us with brushings of her dress” (CP 445). Here, the potential delicacy of contact suggested by “brushings” is anticipated and undermined by the intensity of feeling they inflict as they hover between the extreme of sensation and the delicacy of casual contact. As “a dissociated abundance of being,” her insubstantiality, her formlessness, is the source of her power. She is “More definite for what she is— / Because she is disembodied.” And it is her axiomatic formlessness that gives the momentarily figural impulse, with its “brushings of her dress,” its emotional power.

In four further instances, “brush” and its variants evade tactile meanings by being painterly (CP 198, 215, 385, 436). There is, of course, an element of contact in the act of painting traditionally considered and also, arguably, in the evidence of brush strokes, but the fact of the mediating instrument is crucial. Painting involves touch only at arm’s length, and in that sense it may be thought to ward off closer contact. In “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” in a deliberate movement away from the figural, we find “Weather by Franz Hals, / Brushed up by brushy winds in brushy clouds” (CP 385). Here, the process of accretion, involving the texturing of clouds with the paintbrush as well as the layering of color, has the paradoxical effect of stripping away materiality so as to arrive at the quintes-
sence of the thing desired. The virtue of abstraction for Stevens is precisely its ability to effect “A seeing and unseeing in the eye.” The brushiness of “brushy clouds” is apt in that it is in the nature of clouds sometimes to look like brush strokes. But “brushy winds,” while they might be thought to retain a vestige of the tactile (we sense the wind by its brushing us), have had even that capacity reduced by their being metaphoric: not brushing but brushy.

In “Saint John and the Back-Ache,” we find “big-brushed green,” an analogy for the effect of “A sudden color on the sea” (CP 437) that is in turn an analogy for “The effect of the object” (CP 436), not the object itself but its “presence,” the elusive force that “fills the being before the mind can think.” Stevens—or the part of him that is Saint John—is preoccupied with “the dumbfoundering abyss / Between us and the object” as the undepletable source of both feeling and language. He is emphatically not concerned with fixing objects in language; that sudden color on the sea “is not / That big-brushed green.” Yet that big-brushed green, for all its artfulness, retains the tincture of emotion that signifies. The effect of the object is its capacity to move us. Saint John may dominate the argument, but the last word—literally and conceptually—is given to the Back-Ache who, in the course of conceding defeat, utters the most emotional word of the poem: “pain.”

Related to the arm’s-length brushings of a paintbrush is “The Sail of Ulysses,” III, which contains a glimpse of the Prospero-like creator “Waving purpling wands”; however, a stronger value is given to the naked hand, here metonymized as a finger:

The quiet lamp
For this creator is a lamp
Enlarging like a nocturnal ray
The space in which it stands, the shine
Of darkness, creating from nothingness
Such blank constructions, such public shapes
And murky masonry, one wonders
At the finger that brushes this aside
Gigantic in everything but size. (OP 127)

In this scheme of reversals, the finger must stand for light, a light more intense even than the lamplight that sheds the obscurity necessary to the creative imagination. As one reads of the finger that “brushes this aside,” one joins the wondering poet-figure’s translation to another dimension, a hyperreality that seems so much like the light of revealed truth. Yet, for all the power of that ordinary-sized finger, for all its seeming actuality and the power to surprise that inheres in that, its brushing aside does not involve contact.

The most complex use of “brush” occurs in “Sombre Figuration” from “Owl’s Clover,” where Stevens posits the existence of a deeper-than-rational self:
He was born within us as a second self,
A self of parents who have never died,
Whose lives return, simply, upon our lips,
Their words and ours; in what we see, their hues
Without a season, unstinted in livery,
And ours, of rigid measure, a miser’s paint;
And most in what we hear, sound brushed away,
A mumbling at the elbow, turgid tunes,
As of insects or cloud-stricken birds, away
And away, dialogues between incognitos.

(OP 97; my italics)

As we might by now have come to expect, the word “brushed,” with its unavoidable suggestion of contact, occurs in a phrase that seeks to undo proximity. Since the return of parental words, hues, and especially voices occurs continually, the need to brush them “away / And away” is also continual. The contact between returning parents and present self is represented as touch and as more intimate even than touch, separable from the self only enough to be detectable. The economy of repression and return seems consciously Freudian. It is incurably cyclical, but, in a spirit contrary to Freud, celebratory of that cycle.

We have seen how Stevens consistently undercuts even the delicately tactile aspect of “brush” and its variants, employing them only in locutions that suggest deferral or difference or distance. We have seen, furthermore, how the erosion of the tactile frequently involves abstraction, whether effected by analogy or the allegorical denaturalizing of the agent.

IV

I have been arguing that Stevens derives a particular kind of poetic power from depicting meetings that narrowly fail to happen, contact renounced or deferred, “receding shores / That never touch with inarticulate pang” (CP 69). The self composed by his poetry as a whole consciously values isolation, claims it as critically necessary to his imagination and, once it has been secured, revels in it as in an arena of freedom (“It was her voice that made / The sky acutest at its vanishing. / She measured to the hour its solitude” [CP 129]). Halliday has queried the immense value Stevens placed on aloneness. In his taxonomy of solitude there are four categories: physical remove, emotional or spiritual incompatibility, ontological solitude (none of us dwells in the same world of perception or meaning), and cosmic solitude (since “Phoebus is dead, ephebe” [CP 381]) (Halliday 67). Critics, he charges, have been too indulgent of Stevens: we have followed his lead in failing to differentiate morally between the various kinds of solitude. In particular, we have failed to notice Stevens’ tendency to ascribe physical and emotional solitude to ontological and cosmic causes, a characteristic defence preempts uncomfortable questions
This is a most serious charge, and in the literal terms in which Halliday formulates it, it cannot be countered but only accounted for, for example, by adducing evidence of Stevens’ marital misery.

What Michael Beehler usefully brings to the debate is a way of evaluating Stevens’ poems in terms of their strategies. He argues that while solitude is essential to the speakers of both poems, “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour” is, in ethical terms, a less successful poem than “The World as Meditation” because its appropriative strategy and centripetal movement undercut its final assertion that “being there together is enough” (CP 524), where the paramour is not sufficiently differentiated from the poem’s speaker to constitute an other center of consciousness. By contrast, Penelope’s patient life in “The World as Meditation” is a thoroughly dialogical existence (274–76). Yet I would still want to assert that poetry is, for any poet, a place of freedom and that it remains so irrespective of the evaluative moral considerations that may be brought to bear on it by others. Those moral demands may be every reader’s entitlement, but they cannot change the poet’s deepest emotional dramas; they are what they are.

Hence, rather than attempt to answer Halliday’s charges, in light of all that we have noted about Stevens’ language of touch, I want to propose a fifth category of solitude that might usefully be added to Halliday’s four: that of posthumous experience. My sense is that the isolation effected by death is not covered by Halliday’s category of ontological solitude as he defines it. Dickinson and Faulkner famously availed themselves of the transgressive possibilities of this purely linguistic category, the posthumous speech of “I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—,” say, or Addie’s monologue in As I Lay Dying (or the title itself, for that matter) constituting a genus within this class of solitude. It would seem that for Stevens the absoluteness of the separation of the living and the dead proves a particularly felicitous opportunity for creativity. So completely buffered are the living from the dead—so creatively isolated—that he is free to imagine the dead as poignantly yearning for contact so definite as to be actually physical. The returning ghosts in “Large Red Man Reading,” for example, derive their pathos in precisely this way. The extremity of their imagined feelings is commensurate with the improbability of their achieving their desire, in some of the most physical poetry in all of Stevens:

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They were those that would have wept to step barefoot
into reality,
That would have wept and been happy, have shivered
in the frost
And cried out to feel it again, have run fingers over
leaves
And against the most coiled thorn, have seized on what
was ugly
And laughed. . . . (CP 423–24)
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Something similar happens in “The Weeping Burgher,” a marvelously compact and ingenious poem. The “I” (quite a rare figure in Stevens) laments the deception of appearances and especially the “sorry verities!” (CP 61) that they mask. Mortality—not la condition humaine but the individual chill—informs this poem. The world being what it is, the speaker wishes it ill. Notwithstanding, since he cannot do anything about the verities, he had better concentrate on the sorrow. However, like everything else in this distorted view of the world, the only “cure of sorrow” is via its apparent opposite, “excess, continual”—hence the mannered style of the following stanza, in which the speaker adopts the traditional consolation of poets:

> Permit that if as ghost I come  
> Among the people burning in me still,  
> I come as belle design  
> Of foppish line.

Yet, according to the horrible logic of this poem, the more elegant the style of the return, the wilder the substance of what it expresses, that substance being the substantive “I”:

> And I, then, tortured for old speech,  
> A white of wildly woven rings;  
> I, weeping in a calcined heart,  
> My hands such sharp, imagined things. (CP 61)

There can be little doubt about the vengeful intention of the possessor of those sharp hands, maddened equally by the capacity of poetry to survive its makers and the frustration of his malicious purpose through death. Yet for all its potential violence, one of the most remarkable things about this poem is that it is not transgressive; the dead cannot get at the living, the hands remain “imagined things,” albeit sharp ones. What is dramatized here is rather the terrible imprisonment of the text. The speaker is a “burgher,” keeper and captive of what in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” Stevens called a “castle-fortress-home” (CP 386).

It may be that this non-transgressiveness is principled, for Stevens’ poem does seem to invite a comparison with a poem by Keats that is very clearly transgressive. It is the location of the hands in a future realm of the dead, together with the peculiar mixture of malevolence and frustration, that recall “This living hand . . .”:

> This living hand, now warm and capable  
> Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold  
> And in the icy silence of the tomb,  
> So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights  
> That thou would wish thine own heart dry of blood,
So in my veins red life might stream again,
And thou be conscience-calm’d. See, here it is—
I hold it towards you. (384)

This poem reminds us that one of the uses of the unwieldy and otherwise problematic category of writing called “literature” is to contain it and other poems like it. Who would want to dispense with a category that emphasizes the metaphoric nature of such presentational claims as this poem makes?10 Where Stevens’ poem begins with “strange malice” and ends, for all its sharpness, with pathos of a kind, in Keats’s poem the pattern of feelings is reversed, with pathos turning to something very like malice. As one might expect of a poem about a hand, Keats’s poem tropes predominantly on the sense of touch, rather than sight or sound, hence the contrasting imagery of heat and cold, dryness and wetness, body and spirit, now and never. In fact, the one insistence on seeing—“See, here it is— / I hold it towards you”—creates a kind of blindness in the addressee. For all its vaunting transgressiveness, the immediacy of that last deictic bespeaks the unbridgeable and tantalizing gap between literary artifact and actual world. In fact, the final gesture of proffering the hand or the poem distances the proffered object from a notional center of consciousness: if I “hold it towards you,” I keep the you at arm’s length, watching the you respond to the proffered hand (or poem) with at least a degree of detachment. Perhaps this is not so different, after all, from Stevens’ use of the paintbrush to guard against closer contact.

Nevertheless, Stevens’ “Weeping Burgher,” in contrast to Keats’s poem, is concerned with the ways in which poetry may touch us, both in the sense of reaching out to us as dwellers in futurity and in the intimate sense of moving us, precisely because of the fixed nature of its boundaries. The poem shows us, by example, how poetry may be inhabited by figures—that is, by personages and by tropes—from different historical periods. It covers a surprising amount of ground for a short lyric: the commedia figure of Scaramouche has a carriage from the nineteenth century; the self-confessedly foppish manners of the fourth stanza suggest Restoration comedy (wholly appropriate to the idea of return); whereas the last stanza seems a purely romantic construct, with a hint of Keats in “A white [wight] of wildly woven rings” and a hint of Coleridge’s thrice woven circle that surrounds an actually transgressive figure in “Kubla Khan,” in contrast to Stevens’ would-be transgressor. The alliteration of that line suggests, in addition, that “rings” might be a substitute for “wings,” emphasizing the non-transcendence of the I-figure’s posthumous state. These are not wings to fly but rings that bind, as the world, once distorted by the straight, upright, living “I,” returns at last to distort him with its endless curvature.

It is not just that poems may contain prior texts but that poetic selves may be composed of other selves that preoccupies Stevens. Even after death, other people will be “burning in me still,” the burgher asserts.
Moreover, the poem has something to say about the act of reading, for it is only through reading, a process predicated on authorial absence, that the ghosts of others come to inhabit us too. Initially detectable in their otherness as style, they become, in time, an integral part of our being.

V

Having dealt with two poems in which hands are prominent, I would like, by way of conclusion, to suggest that hands have a unique status in Stevens’ poetry in being permitted to touch. This would not, of itself, sound exceptional—hands are, after all, important organs of touch in the actual world—were it not that we have seen the extent to which in Stevens interpersonal contact seems to have been meticulously and comprehensively evaded. In light of his poetry as a whole, it is extraordinary how few words deliver fully tactile meanings. Hands are the exception; hence, they serve as a metonymy for the entire physical world. Indeed, in all of the poems in Harmonium where the hand or hands occur they are used to signify the physical. Since hands are always associated with the physical world, they frequently represent the principle of immanence. It may be for orthodox neo-Platonic reasons, then, that they are often feminine.

The emotional intensity of the hand for Stevens is especially apparent in the poems after Harmonium. The fifth section of “Esthétique du Mal” begins with the quasi-mechanical kind of self-instruction that was a characteristic strategy of “The Comedian as the Letter C”; yet working against a compulsion to conceal one’s deepest values, and a second compulsion to justify and explain, there comes an unusually strong impulse to state those values:

Within what we permit,
Within the actual, the warm, the near,
So great a unity, that it is bliss,
Ties us to those we love. For this familiar,
This brother even in the father’s eye,
This brother half-spoken in the mother’s throat

we forego

Lament, willingly forfeit the ai-ai

Of parades in the obscurer selvages.
Be near me, come closer, touch my hand, phrases
Compounded of dear relation, spoken twice,
Once by the lips, once by the services
Of central sense, these minutiae mean more
Than clouds, benevolences, distant heads.

(CP 317; italics added)
There is a moment of something like complete self-disclosure in those so-called phrases that together sound remarkably like an invitation. It is only fleeting—not even sustained over a whole line—but it is surely one of the most intimate moments in Stevens’ entire oeuvre, and the most intimate part of it: “touch my hand.”

The most developed example of all, and my final one, is “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” XV. Here Professor Eucalyptus, amid the constant rain, grapples with his desire for the ideal, “the instinct for a rainless land” (CP 475) or “an instinct for heaven” that has its counterpart in a desire for complete self-presence: “a single world / In which he is and as and is are one” (CP 476), i.e., a world that precludes the instinct for heaven as somewhere other. Thus, Stevens argues himself into having to represent heaven on earth. The effects of the transition are extraordinary. It seems that he plays with various kinds of difference—the difference between “counterpart and counterpoint,” between the rain falling on the trees and falling on the ground, the contraries of “hibernal dark” and “primavera,” the contrast between the bare rock and fulsome autumn—until, with an unexpected shift to the present tense,

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)

The effect is at once of relief, as if something that was difficult has become miraculously easy, of rising as if lifted up, of waking from a dream. Stevens’ image of earthly fulfillment is the fully eroticized touch of the actual hand. It is only by becoming aware of Stevens’ characteristic use of the language of touch that the reader can appreciate the intensity of that contact.

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Notes

1 See Vendler on the grounding of “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle” in Stevens’ failing marriage and his making a home “from the Elizabeth Park and the Connecticut River” (80, 6).

2 Robert Lowell, however, omnivorous in respect of influences, did sometimes write like Stevens. His poem “Buenos Aires,” for example, makes deliberate use of a Stevensian rhetoric and use of alliteration (“the bulky beefy breathing of the herds”
In his portrayal of a lethally oppressive regime. By contrast, his poem “The Flaw,” while much less obviously influenced by anyone, exhibits an elegiac sensibility and a delicacy with regard to the sense of touch that, given what I am arguing here, seem truly Stevensian: “Two walking cobwebs, almost bodiless / crossed paths here once, kept house, and lay in beds. / Your fingertip once touched my fingertip / and set us tingling through a thousand threads” (For the Union Dead 67).

Or, in Beehler’s Levinasian formulation: “Being-for-the-other is the ethical relation” (270).

This canto conforms quite closely to Stevens’ treatment of the figural as returning after apocalyptic destruction that I have discussed on another occasion (see below). Although the mother is spoken of as “dissolved” and “destroyed,” her destruction is incomplete: she is still too much of a presence, since Stevens goes on to say that “she has grown old” and “The soft hands are a motion not a touch.” He then stages a properly apocalyptic destruction: “The house will crumble and the books will burn,” after which “They” (the reassembled family) are resurrected in “the house . . . of the mind” (CP 413). Only then—once they are seen to be sufficiently imagined constructs—can the innocent-seeming boreal night of death properly approach them, enabling Stevens to imagine for them an equally innocent ceremony of farewell.

I am referring here to the famous cat-in-the-box paradox first formulated by Erwin Schrödinger in 1935 to explain one of the perplexities of quantum probability in physics. In this hypothetical experiment, a cat is enclosed in a steel chamber (which has become in folklore a box). Also in the chamber (or second chamber of the box) is a radioactive isotope. The radioactive substance has a long half-life; it is bound to decay, but when that process will begin is uncertain. However, the experiment has been set up so that when that process does begin, a lethal poison will be released into the chamber. The point is that until somebody looks inside the chamber, the cat cannot be thought to be simply either alive or dead, but must be thought of as alive and dead at the same time (a “superimposition of states’’), or, in Schrödinger’s words, “having in it the living and the dead cat . . . mixed or smeared out in equal parts’’ (qtd. in Gribbin 21). Stevens’ lovers embody this principle of uncertainty: they seem alive and dead at the same time; they have and they have not consummated their love. The iris, too, might be thought of as a metonymic version of the observer necessary to decide which of the alternative outcomes is the case. For a more general essay on Stevens and Schrödinger, see Dana Wilde, esp. 4–10.

The Concordance lists an additional instance of “hold” from Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise, where the Second Chinese speaks, in a subjunctive construction, of “Holding this candle to us” (OP 153). As a purely verbal instance of holding, this example would belong in my third group, but, of course, actually holding a candle must be just what he is doing. The handling of various ceremonial objects is integral to the action of the play.

See, for example, Halliday’s reading of the poem (51), and also his claim that Stevens’ poetry manifests a “consistent failure . . . to describe the female other as a fully human individual, as a separate subjectivity, an independent actor and perceiver outside his own mind” (54).

Halliday (51) thinks this poem is much less sinister than I do.

Vendler goes some way to suggesting this in her analysis of “A Postcard from the Volcano,” which she reads as being written “in a posthumous voice” (35).

For an excellent reading of this poem as an apostrophic lyric see Jonathan Culler, 69.

One result of this is that their significance, overall, is remarkably straightforward. The only perplexing example occurs in the sixth section of “The Comedian as the Letter C,” where Crispin becomes a father:

The chits came for his jigging, bluet-eyed,
Hands without touch yet touching poignantly,
Leaving no room upon his cloudy knee,
Prophetic joint, for its diviner young. (CP 43)

I cannot read these lines completely, since I cannot fathom why the hands should be without touch. They seem to be the outstretched hands of the children signaling to their distant eminence of a father their desire to be picked up and “jigged”; beyond that, all is mystery.

Works Cited


The Poetry of Matter: Stevens and Bergson

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I. Introduction

WALLACE STEVENS’ AESTHETICS and Henri Bergson’s ontology considered the relationship between mind and matter outside the Hegelian system, which reluctantly admitted the reality of the material world but only as a necessary moment in the self-determination of spirit. The upshot of Hegel’s metaphysics was the self-recognition attained by spirit through its own self-alienation. Spirit alienates itself into its other, nature, then returns to itself as absolute, having been resurrected from its self-negation in the material world. The privileged term in this claustrophobic system—“reconciliation”—presupposed the dialectical opposition between spirit and nature, subject and object, mind and matter. Since Hegel defined the material world as spirit in its otherness, as “a little death,” so to speak, of the spirit, that, however, spirit was bound to overcome, the material world could not but be reduced to a moment in the uncompromising dialectic of spirit, a moment whose necessity lay merely in its annihilation by spirit. Kant’s attempt to distinguish clearly between the different faculties of the mind as well as to preserve the privileged status of reason and of consciousness, along with Hegel’s insistence on preserving the opposition between spirit and matter, were challenged uncompromisingly by Nietzsche, whose thought anticipated Stevens’ poetics and Bergson’s philosophy of becoming.

Nietzsche’s critique of the mechanistic interpretation of the world and of the hypostases of metaphysics—substance, attribute, presence, truth, subject, object, action, quality, space, time, cause/effect—centered around two major prejudices: the concept of motion, which, Nietzsche argued, is rooted in the linguistic habit of attributing a doer to every deed, and the concept of substance or unity “deriving from our psychical ‘experience’ ” (WP 338). Nietzsche rejected the mechanistic notion of motion as something that happens to substance, as somehow superadded to it, arguing instead that motion, in its original sense as sensation, is intrinsic to substance (WP 335). In The Creative Mind, Bergson showed duration to be the very content (substance) of life rather than a form external to it. Similarly,
Stevens’ theory of poetry made it clear that poetry is life insofar as it reflects the indeterminacy and flux of reality.

The interdependence of the real and the unreal in Stevens’ theory, and of mind and matter in Bergson’s philosophy, had their roots in Nietzsche’s critique of the category of essence. Nietzsche defined the essence of a thing as its relatedness to or embeddedness in other things: “The properties of a thing are effects on other ‘things’ . . . i.e., there is no thing without other things” (WP 302). This is essentially a poetic idea describing the nature of metaphor or poetry: the construction of a poetic image is a reflection or an analog of the construction of the thing itself, an idea going back to Alexander Baumgarten’s view of poetry as a “perfect sensate discourse” (39). Both the thing and the image are defined as intersections of relations: the thing is the crossing point of other things, while the image emerges from a drawing together, by analogy, of several things. We perceive things as entities, rather than as constant change, because the objective manifestation of change differs from our subjective perception of it. As a result of the work of memory, which consists in condensing the infinite number of vibrations constituting objects into a specific perception, thus reducing multiplicity and repetition to unity and identity, we perceive the material, objective world as changing slowly. It is precisely because it is changing infinitely faster than we could ever perceive that it appears as though it is changing slowly, and, for the same reason, it appears to be extended, spread out. Things appear to have being because of the nature of our perception. The poetic image, on one hand, and intuition, on the other hand, break through the spell of inscription, intensifying perception to the point where we experience the flux of the world.

Stevens’ and Bergson’s privileging of an intuitive experience of reality and their mistrust for the intellect, which they considered an impoverished version of intuition (Bergson) or imagination (Stevens), followed in the steps of Nietzsche’s critique of consciousness as reactive, as a technique of inscription translating the unfamiliar (the body) into the familiar and his critique of intellect as that which reduces change to substance, becoming to being. “Thought” was the privileged term in the Hegelian system. In fact, Hegel defined thought as the proper form of spirit, art being its improper form, the opposition or the detour, in which spirit is able to recognize itself and become one with itself:

Thinking . . . constitutes the inmost essential nature of spirit. . . . [T]he power of the thinking spirit lies in being able not only to grasp itself in its proper form as thinking, but to know itself again just as much when it has surrendered its proper form to feeling and sense, to comprehend itself in its opposite, because it changes into thoughts what has been estranged and so reverts to itself. (12–13)
On the other hand, Nietzsche, Bergson, and Stevens considered the intellect to be merely a condensation of something bigger and undetermined, “a vague nebulosity” (Bergson, CE xii), which could be intuition (Bergson), imagination (Stevens) or “the higher body” (Nietzsche, WP 358). Indeed, Nietzsche argued, “‘Thinking,’ as epistemologists conceive it, simply does not occur: it is a quite arbitrary fiction, arrived at by selecting one element from the process [selecting ideas and excluding affects, thereby disguising the visceral nature of thought] and eliminating all the rest, an artificial arrangement for the purpose of intelligibility—” (WP 264).

Hegel saw art’s justification in that it liberated phenomena from their transitory, accidental nature. However, as Adorno’s critique of Hegel made clear, the nature of art is transitoriness, whereas art degrades itself whenever it begins to strive after durability. The subtlety of reality, which Stevens’ poetry captured, was the greatest value in life, according to Nietzsche: “An artist cannot endure reality, he looks away from it, back: he seriously believes that the value of a thing resides in that shadowy residue one derives from colors, form, sound, ideas; he believes that the more subtilized, attenuated, transient a thing or a man is, the more valuable he becomes; the less real, the more valuable” (WP 308; italics added).

Adorno’s critique rightfully pointed out the danger in Hegel’s understanding of spirit as integrating and thus negating externality, materiality. Adorno observed that absolute, successful integration turns art into “a machine in aimlessly idling motion” (43). Art is authentic only when it preserves an element of indeterminacy, nonsubjectivity, unforeseeableness against the pressure of determined reality. Stevens’ poetry and Bergson’s philosophy of becoming bear witness to the evanescence, the ephemeral-ity of life. Poetry does not reduce the world to something stable and unified but rather intensifies this essential indeterminacy. The imagination in Stevens’ theory is constantly in search of a language of things, a language beyond signification. The unreal created by the poetic imagination is impersonal, real, objective, since it does not give in to the ideology of presence.

Whereas Hegel idealized only the sensuous in art, Stevens and Bergson went further, claiming that the material world itself—indepedently of its presentation in art—was “subtle,” to use Stevens’ term, or ideal. The subtlety or ideality of reality was not seen as the result of spirit’s activity upon reality, but as the very nature of matter as “image,” to use Bergson’s term. This new understanding of reality underlay Stevens’ idea of poetry as an intensification of reality. For Stevens and Bergson, even the highest degree of abstraction was rooted in materiality. Hence, Bergson searched for the origin of our general ideas in what he called “natural general ideas” (CM 64), while Stevens considered the real as the matrix of metaphor, of poetry. Whereas Bergson insisted that perception does not add anything to the thing perceived but only offers a limited vision of the thing, Stevens showed that in inventing the rest of the object perceived and thus trying
to compensate for what seemed to be a deficiency in perception, the imagination achieves more than the actual. It is in this sense that Nietzsche spoke of the will to power as a will to creating, forming, inventing, which must be valued more than truth:

The perspective of all organic functions, all the strongest instincts of life: the force in all life that \textit{wills} error; error as the precondition even of thought. Before there is “thought” there must have been “invention”; \textit{the construction of identical cases, of the appearance of sameness, is more primitive than the knowledge of sameness}. (WP 293; italics added)

Invention or error is the essence of life as continually diverging from itself: “invention” is differentiation, while “error” is difference and excess. Just as for Stevens poetry is life, for Nietzsche fiction-making is the strongest instinct of life: “The world . . . is not a fact but a fable and approximation on the basis of a meager sum of observations; it is ‘in flux,’ as something in a state of becoming, as a falsehood always changing but never getting near the truth: for—there is no ‘truth’ ” (WP 330). The will to power as a will to illusion is the will to create. The will to truth, which splits the world into real and apparent, is the “\textit{impotence of the will to create}” (WP 317). “The unreal” (Stevens) and “the virtual” (Bergson) are terms whose origins lie in Nietzsche’s celebration of the will to error or the will to illusion.

Philosophers and artists working in the first decades of the twentieth century inherited the question that underlay the grand philosophical systems of Kant and Hegel, the question of the relationship between mind and matter. In \textit{Appearance and Reality} F. H. Bradley set out to show how appearance, which he found to be self-contradictory, was related to absolute reality, whose mark was self-consistency. Every kind of thinking about the world, Bradley discovered, grants us only appearances: “a relational way of thought—anyone that moves by the machinery of terms and relations—must give appearance, and not truth” (28). Bradley considered space, time, self, activity, things, nature, and in each case he concluded that these were appearances since he found them to contain indissoluble self-discrepancies. The contradictory character of space and time lay in the irreconcilability of relation and quality:

[S]pace is endless, while an end is essential to its being. Space cannot come to a final limit, either within itself or on the outside. And yet, so long as it remains something always passing away, internally or beyond itself, it is not space at all . . . . Space is a relation—which it cannot be; it is a quality or substance—which again it cannot be. (31)

Time posed the same problem of reconciling diversity and unity:
If you take time as a relation between units without duration, then the whole time has no duration, and is not time at all. But, if you give duration to the whole time, then at once the units themselves are found to possess it; and they thus cease to be units. Time in fact is “before” and “after” in one; and without this diversity it is not time. But these differences cannot be asserted of the unity. . . . The relation is not a unity, and yet the terms are non-entities, if left apart. (33–34)

A similar inconsistency plagued things:

A thing is a thing . . . by being what it was. And it does not appear how this relation of sameness can be real. It is a relation connecting the past with the present, and this connexion [sic] is evidently vital to the thing. But, if so, the thing has become . . . the relation of passages in its own history. And if we assert that the thing is this inclusive relation, which transcends any given time, surely we have allowed that the thing, though not wholly an idea, is an idea essentially. And it is an idea which at no actual time is ever real. (62–63)

A thing, Bradley concluded, cannot overcome or disguise its essentially contradictory nature:

The thing avoids contradiction by its disappearance into relations, and by its admission of the adjectives [its qualities] to a standing of their own. But it avoids contradiction by a kind of suicide. It can give no rational account of the relations and the terms which it adopts, and it cannot recover the real unity, without which it is nothing. The whole device is a clear makeshift. It consists in saying to the outside world, “I am the owner of these my adjectives,” and to the properties, “I am but a relation, which leaves you your liberty.” And to itself and for itself it is the futile pretence to have both characters at once. (19)

Rejecting the doctrine of the thing-in-itself, which rendered appearances and reality as two absolutely separate realms, Bradley insisted “The bewildering mass of phenomenal diversity must . . . somehow be at unity and self-consistent; for it cannot be elsewhere than in reality, and reality excludes discord” (123). The only way to reconcile appearance and reality was, following Hegel, to reduce existence to a degraded, alienated manifestation of Spirit.

Despite Bradley’s idealism, his understanding of things as supplemented by the Absolute came close to William James’s notion of pure experience as consisting of different bits functioning as one another’s
substitutes or supplements. Thus, Bradley claimed that there were *degrees* of truth and reality:

Nothing in the universe can be lost, nothing fails to contribute to the single Reality, but every finite diversity is also supplemented and transformed. Everything in the Absolute still is that which it is for itself. Its private character remains, and is but neutralized by complement and addition. And hence, because nothing in the end can be *merely* itself, in the end no appearance, as such, can be real. But *appearances fail of reality in varying degrees*; and to assert that one on the whole is worth no more than another, is fundamentally vicious. (453; italics added)

James opposed Bradley’s “ultra-rationalism,” which equated truth with consistency: “Immediate experience has to be broken into subjects and qualities, terms and relations, to be understood as truth at all. Yet when so broken it is less consistent than ever. Taken raw, it is all undistinguished. Intellectualized, it is all distinction without oneness” (48). Whereas Bradley believed reality to be spiritual (489), James questioned the very description of an experience as spiritual or material: “There is no original spirituality or materiality of being, intuitively discerned . . . but only a translocation of experiences from one world to another” (74). What makes experiences spiritual or material is “nothing intrinsic in the individual experiences. It is their way of behaving towards each other, their system of relations, their function” (77). While Bradley was concerned with overthrowing the opposition between appearance and reality, James set out to overthrow the opposition between mind and matter, subject and object: “[T]here is only one primal stuff or material in the world, a stuff of which everything is composed, and if we call that stuff ‘pure experience,’ then knowing can easily be explained as a particular sort of relation towards one another into which portions of pure experience may enter. The relation itself is a part of pure experience” (4).

James’s “radical empiricism” blurred the distinction between consciousness and its content:

*Experience, I believe, has no . . . inner duplicity; and the separation of it into consciousness and content comes, not by way of subtraction, but by way of addition. . . . Just so, I maintain, does a given undivided portion of experience [whether perceptual or conceptual], taken in one context of associates, play the part of a knower, of a state of mind, of “consciousness”; while in a different context the same undivided bit of experience plays the part of a thing known, of an objective “content.” In a word, in one group it figures as a thought, in another group as a thing. And, since it can figure in both groups simultaneously we have*
every right to speak of it as subjective and objective both at once. (6–7)

Since consciousness “connotes a kind of external relation, and does not denote a special stuff or way of being” (14), pure experience is “only virtually or potentially either object or subject as yet. For the time being, it is plain, unqualified actuality or existence, a simple that” (13).

James took issue with Bradley’s condemnation of experience as self-contradictory, arguing instead that once we accept both conjunctions and disjunctions as equally real, rather than condemning disjunctions as self-contradictory and illusory, otherness itself would turn out to be merely an illusion (30). Bradley’s argument was actually closer to James’s than James probably realized:

[I]f, seeking for reality, we go to experience, what we certainly do not find is a subject or an object, or indeed any other thing whatever, standing separate and on its own bottom. What we discover rather is a whole in which distinctions can be made, but in which divisions do not exist. . . . [R]eality is sentient experience. I mean that to be real is to be indissolubly one thing with sentience. . . . And what I repudiate is the separation of feeling from the felt, or of the desired from desire, or of what is thought from thinking, or the division . . . of anything from anything else. . . . [T]he Absolute . . . will hence be a single and all-inclusive experience, which embraces every partial diversity in concord. (128–29; italics added)

Blaming Bradley for ignoring finite experience and subordinating it to the Absolute, James pointed out the incompleteness and insufficiency of our knowledge, which is always in transit: “[S]o much of our experience comes as an insufficient and consists of process and transition. Our fields of experience have no more definite boundaries than have our fields of view. Both are fringed forever by a more that continuously develops, and that continuously supersedes them as life proceeds” (35).

While James and Bergson were trying to rescue pure experience from the intellect, there were those who, like Julien Benda, considered this emphasis on intuition excessive and even dangerous. Benda was full of doubts about Bergson’s philosophy of intuition, which he scornfully called “intellectual anaesthesia” (131) or a form of aphasia (12). According to Benda, Bergson and his followers ascribed an excessive significance to pure affectivity at the expense of the intellectual or critical experience of art (9). He took issue with their “demand that art shall avoid any attempt to distinguish between things, all clean-cut separations and definite outlines, and shall present them in their indistinctness, in their inter-penetration, in their mobility, in their fluidity” (18). Benda challenged the Bergsonian critique of the intellect as a distortion of our pure, direct perception of the world.
Philosophers of intuition, Benda claimed, refused “to discriminate between intelligence and dry, unimaginative reasoning, in order to bring the former into disrepute” (14). Insofar as Stevens and Bergson were concerned with the relationship between mind and matter, they found themselves at the heart of this debate on boundaries.

II. Imagination and Perception

The relevance of Bergson to a study of Stevens’ theory of the imagination consists in the analogy that can be drawn between the relation of memory, perception, and matter in Bergson, on one hand, and the relation between reality and imagination in Stevens, on the other hand. Bergson’s “imagistic” ontology, developed in *Matter and Memory*, describes material objects as “images” and sees a difference only in degree between matter as a self-existing image and perception as the reflection of that image back upon itself. While Bergson claims that perception does not add anything to the image perceived, Stevens asserts that the imagination does not add anything to the perception of an object. Perception is related to the world as a part to the whole: it is an act of selection. Hence, perception does not distort the world; it only offers a limited vision of it. Imagination, on the other hand, is an intensification of normal perception: it “corrects” the limited vision of perception and enlarges its object indefinitely. Bergson’s theory of the relationship between matter and mind, of the materiality of perception, suggests that mind is separated from matter only by memory.

Stevens’ theory of the imagination, glimpses of which one finds in *The Necessary Angel* and in the prose pieces in *Opus Posthumous*, also searches for the origin of imagination in the material world. The material world, for Stevens, is poetry: “There is a universal poetry that is reflected in everything. . . . [T]here exists an unascertained and fundamental aesthetic, or order, of which poetry [and the other arts] are manifestations” (NA 160). Life is always already poetry: “Description [and, we read, poetry] is an element, like air or water” (OP 196). Bergson’s account of the way perception detaches itself from the thing as a picture or a representation shares a lot with Stevens’ idea of the origin of poetry: it, too, detaches itself from the perception of the real thing, rather than being added to it. Detachment being a form of obscuring, both Bergson and Stevens argue that there is more in the virtual or the unreal than in the real. The phenomenon of appearing (of the real) is one of obscuring:

Representation is there, but always virtual—being neutralized, at the very moment when it might become actual, by the obligation to continue itself and to lose itself in something else. To obtain this conversion from the virtual to the actual, it would be necessary, not to throw more light on the object, but, on the contrary, to obscure some of its aspects, to diminish it by the greater part of itself, so that the remainder, instead of being
encased in its surroundings as a thing, should detach itself from them as a picture. (Bergson, MM 36)

Bergson and Stevens use a similar rhetoric, Bergson talking of consciousness as continually expanding and contracting, and thus enlarging or diminishing its content (MM 166); Stevens considering poetry as an intensification of reality: “Reality is the object seen in its greatest common sense” (OP 202). Both discourses could be described as discourses of tension, in which “physical” metaphors serve to enhance even further the objectivity of mind and matter that both authors affirm. Stevens believes that the life of the imagination is “separated” from our life in the material world only by its higher intensity and that we continually move between weaker and stronger states, the stronger ones being colored by the imagination. Similarly, Bergson remarks that there are “divers tones of mental life, or, in other words, our psychic life may be lived at different heights, now nearer to action [or perception, which prepares us for action], now further removed from it, according to the degree of our attention to life” (MM 14). Both Stevens and Bergson talk of poetry and life, respectively, in terms of tendencies rather than states. For Bergson, “[V]ital properties are never entirely realized, though always on the way to become so; they are not so much states as tendencies” (CE 13). Things and states “are only views, taken by our mind, of becoming” (CE 248). Stevens regards poetry and life as analogues of each other, both partaking of a common tendency, “the tendency to become literature” (NA 43).

It is difficult to resist the widespread and tempting argument that Stevens’ poetry aimed at a synthesis of reality and imagination, and yet such a resistance, as Paul Bové urges, is necessary. Comparing Stevens to Williams, for instance, Joseph Riddel argues that, unlike Williams, Stevens “was never so much attracted by the discovery of ‘things as they are’ . . . as by the discovery of himself in the act of discovery” (12). Insisting that Stevens’ subject was “not the world-as-seen so much as the process of seeing it” (65), Riddel perpetuates the dualism Bergson and Stevens rejected, the separation of seeing from the thing seen. Bové, on the other hand, feels that the simultaneous existence of opposites in Stevens’ poetry should not be sublated. The idea of contradiction, Bové contends, is part of Stevens’ “centerless vision”; this idea “which in itself emerges from the language of ‘presence,’ of onto-theology, is a fiction which should not be granted any superior metaphysical status” (207–08).

For Stevens the imagination operates in the same way as perception does for Bergson, as a condenser: “[A]ll the categories of perception . . . correspond, on the whole, to the choice of a certain order of greatness for condensation” (CM 69). Perception condenses since it needs a fixed point upon which to act. Condensation is the flip side of delay in Bergson’s theory. Consciousness is born in the delay between an external disturbance and the body’s reaction to it. The delay consists in the “failure” or choice of the
brain not to prolong the disturbance into a motor activity. Our mental life then is an aggregate of such delays, of potential actions on other images. The imagination, too, condenses: “What light requires a day to do, and by day I mean a kind of Biblical revolution of time, the imagination does in the twinkling of an eye” (NA 61–62). The imagination, for Stevens, is not a separate faculty but the sum of all our faculties (NA 61). Stevens does not want to localize it but instead he considers intellect, perception, and memory as different manifestations of imagination, which becomes coextensive with the mind. Poetry includes imagination, instinct, and intellect in various degrees. Perception, memory, and intellect are only different phases of the imagination, determined by different degrees of sophistication, intensity, or vitality. Perception is the privileged one of these three since it is determined in terms of sight. Memory is the imagination of the past. The imagination is the most intensified kind of perception.

The poet’s perceptions spring from the most extreme ranges of sensibility. The poetic genius, “because of the abnormal ranges of his sensibility, not only accumulates experiences with greater rapidity, but accumulates experiences and qualities of experience accessible only in the extreme ranges of sensibility” (NA 66). The intellect is a condensation or a weakening of the imagination. Bergson also stresses that the intellect is only a condensation of something bigger and undetermined. The intellect, a “luminous nucleus,” is made up of the “vague nebulosity” that surrounds it (CE xii). The imagination in Stevens’ theory shares with memory in Bergson’s theory the capacity to heighten the sense of reality. The imagination enhances the sense of reality since it is analogous to reality. Memory, on the other hand, “capable, by reason of its elasticity, of expanding more and more, reflects upon the object a growing number of suggested images . . . [which] results in creating anew not only the object perceived, but also the ever widening systems with which it may be bound up” (MM 105). The virtual part of the image, representing “a higher expansion of memory . . . attains . . . deeper strata of reality” (MM 104–05). The memory-image and the poetic image bring into the open the virtual part of reality and thus heighten the sense of reality.

Stevens privileges the imagination over thought, which he calls “an infection” (OP 185), just as Bergson privileges philosophical intuition over the intelligence. Thought usually pictures to itself the new as a rearrangement of preexistent elements—nothing is ever lost to thought and nothing ever created—but intuition perceives unforeseeable novelty and sees that “the mind draws from itself more than it has, that spirituality consists in just that, and that reality, impregnated with spirit, is creation” (Bergson, CM 39). The imaginative activity that “diffuses itself throughout our lives” (NA 149) exemplifies a poetic value that is an “intuitional value,” not one of knowledge. In this respect, Stevens’ idea of the imagination as metaphysics is analogous to Bergson’s idea of intuitional metaphysics. As Riddel points out, the task Stevens faced was to define the modern, secular imagi-
nation: “Having no metaphysics on which to hang imagination, he makes of imagination a pure metaphysics, an activity of process analogous to the vital process of the material, which perpetuates the self as a part of, yet apart from, ‘things as they are’” (35).

Both Stevens and Bergson attempt to show that our ideas originate in our imagination, that the intellect is just an anemic version of the imagination: “[W]e live in concepts of the imagination before the reason has established them. If this is true, then reason is simply the methodizer of the imagination” (NA 154). The common ground of imagination and intellect is the resemblance they establish between things: “Perhaps resemblance which seems to be related so closely to the imagination is related even more closely to the intelligence, of which perceptions of resemblance are effortless accelerations” (NA 75).

Linking resemblance to intellect, Stevens echoes Bergson’s analysis of the formation of general ideas, developed in The Creative Mind. Abstractions or general ideas are formed, according to Bergson, through an “automatic extraction of resemblances” and the “resemblance between things or states, which we declare we see, is above all the quality common to these states or things, of obtaining from our body the same reaction” (CM 63). Concepts are therefore constructed on the model of corporeal or natural ideas, i.e., the reactions of the body to external objects. Artificial ideas (language) are anticipated or embodied in these natural ideas, which they imitate. Our ideas “translate essential resemblances[,] . . . lending something of their firmness” (CM 65) or credibility to language. Poetry, as metaphor, is then closer to the origin of language, i.e., of general ideas, since its essence is the postulation of resemblances between things. Resemblance, as distinct from identity, which is merely geometrical (spatial), belongs to the domain of art. In fact, Bergson suggests that evolution itself ought to be considered in aesthetic terms as it is the elaboration of resemblances: “it is often a purely aesthetic feeling which prompts the evolutionary biologist to suppose related forms between which he is the first to see a resemblance” (CM 67). Echoing Stevens’ claim that poetry and life are one, Bergson here implies that ontology is a kind of aesthetics. Stevens, like Bergson, argues “All of our ideas come from the natural world: Trees = umbrellas” (OP 189). Hence the “umbrellas” in “Tea”: “Your lamp-light fell / On shining pillows, / Of sea-shades and sky-shades, / Like umbrellas in Java” (CP 112–13).

Our senses then determine even the highest levels of abstraction. Stevens traces the origin of what he calls “emotional images” back to emotions shared by everyone: “the nature of the image is analogous to the nature of the emotion from which it springs; and when one speaks of images, one means analogies. If, then, an emotional image . . . communicates the emotion that generates it, its effect is to arouse the same emotion in others” (NA 111). Just as Bergson shows the transition from individual bodily experiences to universally shared concepts, Stevens’ understanding of im-
ages as analogous to emotions makes possible the transition from the physical to the intellectual, from the particular to the abstract. Insofar as the responses of the body are lived, i.e., immediate, whereas it “takes time” to group those resemblances in ideas, it can be said, with Stevens, that the resemblances the imagination perceives are the accelerations of those same resemblances that our intelligence unfolds so slowly. This would explain why metaphors at first strike us as artificial—our intellect needs to unfold these instantaneous, accelerated perceptions of resemblances. The intellect always lags behind and it does not notice a resemblance unless it is first unfolded, slowed down, its condensed form dissolved, which usually means spatialized. Since the intellect is insensitive to “the instantaneous disclosures of living” (NA 154), it remains within the bounds of analysis: “It may be that the imagination is a miracle of logic and that its exquisite divinations are calculations beyond analysis, as the conclusions of the reason are calculations wholly within analysis” (NA 154).

The imagination is the intensification of the intellect and, to that extent, it is still a form of “calculation,” only a calculation so accelerated that it does not lend itself to analysis. In discovering resemblances, the imagination enhances the sense of reality: “If resemblance is described as a partial similarity between two dissimilar things, it complements and reinforces that which the two dissimilar things have in common. It makes it brilliant” (NA 77). The reality of a thing is enhanced because it is made ambiguous: “The proliferation of resemblances extends an object,” and the point where this growth starts is “the point at which ambiguity has been reached” (NA 78–79). Ambiguity, instead of creating doubt, or perhaps precisely through increasing doubt, heightens the sense of reality. The paradoxical nature of poetic images, the fact that their reality depends on their ambiguity, was accounted for as early as in Baumgarten’s Reflections on Poetry. Baumgarten distinguished confused and extensively clear poetic representations from distinct, intensively clear ideas. Since more aspects of an object are represented in a confused representation, the object represented is more determinate and thus both more ambiguous or poetic and more real (42–43).

III. Transparency

Citing Whitehead’s Science and the Modern World, in which Whitehead claims “‘everything is everywhere at all times, for every location involves an aspect of itself in every other location’” (qtd. in OP 273), Stevens comments that Whitehead’s idea comes “from a level where everything is poetic, as if the statement that every location involves an aspect of itself in every other location produced in the imagination a universal iridescence, a dithering of presences and, say, a complex of differences” (OP 273). Every object, Stevens believes, participates in every other object and no object exists in isolation, as a universe in itself. Things are only as the intersec-
tions of interrelations between things. The transformation of substance into subtlety is the disclosure of each thing as immersed in the network of all other things: “Nothing is itself taken alone. Things are because of interrelations or interactions” (OP 189). Despite the postmodern character of his premise, however, Stevens does not draw from it the already banal conclusion that the world is just an image in our mind or a construct of language. In this he is in agreement with Bergson, who also believes “Every image is within certain images and without others; but of the aggregate of images we cannot say that it is within us or without us, since interiority and exteriority are only relations among images” (MM 25).

The predominantly anti-postmodern nature of Stevens’ theory of poetry becomes especially evident when we consider the relationship of transparency that Bergson affirms between matter and perception and Stevens affirms between language and reality. Language can be considered by analogy with Bergson’s idea of the world as “an aggregate of images”; that is, words, as signifiers, can be thought of as Bergson’s “images.” The meanings of a word are produced just as our perceptions of things are. Both are like mirages: they are the reflections of images/words back upon themselves. Words are not added to things but they are thoughts, and if they are thoughts they are also things, which, in the imagination, are the condensation of thought and feeling. Words are not added to things; rather, things are dissociated from words in the form of thoughts, thoughts being the intensification of things.

This transparency of language expresses Stevens’ general rejection of meaning and depth. When things are subtilized into words (thoughts), poetic language attains the transparency of an impressionistic painting. Reality is then no longer mediated through language nor is language reduced to its referential function. That poetry is the intensification of reality means that language can intensify things to thoughts, can incorporate the word signifying a thing, which is to say the thought about the thing, into the very substance of the thing. This transparency is possible because, for Stevens, a thing is not absolutely separated from the word signifying it, but the two of them approximate each other.

The middle term in the relationship between a “thing” and a “word” is a “thought.” A thing becomes a thought when we think about it intensely, and the thought is embodied in a word. A thing’s transformation into a word is a real process that starts in the real and never surpasses it. When a poem fails, it does so because it is a work of fancy, not of the imagination. Fancy, Stevens writes, “is an exercise of selection from among objects already supplied by association, a selection made for purposes which are not then and therein being shaped but have been already fixed” (NA 10–11). The unreal is not the fantastic but the unbelievable. An image becomes less credible the more it is predetermined by an end external to it. The more the image is inscribed in an already fixed system of associations, the less real it is. Paradoxically, the unreal is the absolutely real, the absolutely
given, the most familiar, the most immediate. Conversely, the most fantastic image, if credible, if not predetermined, not purposeful, will be the most real. The imagination loses vitality as it moves toward fancy, toward inscription, toward what we call “fact” or “reality.” Adorno was to develop this notion of the objectivity of the new, the unreal, or experimental in his Aesthetic Theory (28–37).

IV. Real and Unreal

It might be helpful to use Bergson’s diagram of our mental life in order to illustrate Stevens’ understanding of the relationship between the unreal and the real. The language Stevens and Bergson use to talk about the relationship between memory and perception and between the unreal and the real is strikingly similar. Both speak about these relationships in terms of intensity, tension, contraction and expansion, vitality. Bergson’s diagram of our mental life is a cone, turned upside down, of which the base is the “location” of pure memory, while the tip of the cone cutting into the plane of the real is the point of perception (MM 162). The cone is filled with memory-images at different stages of condensation—the closer one moves to the base, the more the memory-images dissolve into pure memory, and the closer one moves to the tip, the more memory is concentrated and made relevant to the demands of perception. Now imagine this cone, only turned in such a way that the base is at the bottom and the tip at the top. Stevens argues that the poet starts from the real: “The real is only the base. But it is the base” (OP 187). The real, material object, once it is thought and felt intensely, becomes poetry; the unreal is not added to the real but “decreated” from it. Thus, the base of Stevens’ cone would be the real, and the cone would be filled with the real at different stages of intensification or concentration, so that poetry—the tip of the cone—would be the highest intensification of the real. Now it becomes possible to explain Stevens’ paradoxical claim that the unreal is the most real: “The magnificent cause of being, / The imagination, the one reality / In this imagined world” (CP 25).

Since the unreal is the intensification of the real, the closer one moves to the tip of the cone, the more intensified the real becomes, hence the more real, while the closer one moves to the base of the cone, the more rarified and diluted the real becomes, the more unreal, since we are habituated to it. Richard A. Macksey observes that Stevens shares with the impressionists the quest for an identity “before the object” and cites Ramon Fernandez’s explication of “the naïve impression”:

“D’où vient donc ce sens de la réalité qui est incontestablement le don précieux de l’impressionisme? De ce que l’objet qui n’est plus perçu qu’à travers les lunettes du sens commun n’est plus senti par nous, nous sommes anesthésiés par l’habitude. Survienne une circonstance qui éveille en nous des
impressions vives et naïves, aussitôt nous reprenons possession de notre sensibilité, nous nous connaissons devant l’objet.” (199)

[From where comes the sense of reality, which is incontestably the precious gift of impressionism? From the fact that as long as the object is perceived only through the lenses of common sense, it is not really felt by us; we are anesthesized by habit. But should something awaken in us vivid and naive impressions, we immediately recover our sensibility, we know ourselves in the presence of the object.] (My translation; italics added)

The poet engages in two opposite movements or gestures: on one hand, he abstracts reality and places it in his imagination, thus defamiliarizing it; on the other hand, in this very gesture of defamiliarization he renders reality familiar inasmuch as before reality is placed in the imagination, its complete poverty has made it unfamiliar, foreign to us. Interestingly, Stevens associates this poverty of reality specifically with the spatial perception of the world as an extension of objects in space. Thus he echoes Bergson’s critique of metaphysics as the forgetfulness of time or the reduction of time to space. After all, space is what is most immediate to us; it is the very substratum of our idea of immediacy and familiarity. All of reality, before it is placed in the imagination, is poor, but this poverty characterizes especially the part of reality most immediate to us because it is the part we are most prone to reduce to spatiality. If the poet is concerned with the life lived in the composition of a scene, rather than with the scene itself, his major concern must be change, mobility, duration. It is not surprising then that Stevens elevates the sound of words as the essence of poetry: “above everything else, poetry is words; and . . . words, above everything else, are, in poetry, sounds” (NA 32). Duration, after all, is the essence of a sound.

The “decreation”—a term Stevens borrowed from Simone Weil (NA 174)—of the unreal from the real is possible because the unreal is the virtual aspect of the real. Bergson describes the relation between a perception and the continuity from which it is isolated as an infinite number of circles inside one another: “the immediate horizon given to our perception appears to us to be necessarily surrounded by a wider circle, existing though unperceived, this circle itself implying yet another outside it and so on, ad infinitum. It is, then, of the essence of our actual perception, inasmuch as it is extended, to be always only a content in relation to a vaster, even an unlimited, experience which contains it” (MM 144). The material object, for Bergson, consists of “the multitude of unperceived elements by which it is linked with all other objects” (MM 147). In aesthetic terms, this means that the material object has the structure of metaphor inasmuch as a metaphor reveals this very “multitude of unperceived ele-
ments.” Stevens insists that reality “includes all its natural images, and its connotations are without limit” (NA 24). Reality is not given but attained: “Reality is not what it is. It consists of the many realities which it can be made into” (OP 202).

The enlargement of an object by the imagination is particularly evident in Stevens’ landscape poems. Stevens usually begins with a single object and, accumulating metaphors or similes, expands the identity of the original particular but also, retrospectively, the identity of all other particulars that get pulled into this avalanche of resemblances, until the reader forgets the original object. Thus, a poem typically starts from a center and gradually moves out into circles. Such is the case, for example, in “The Load of Sugar-Cane” and in “Metaphors of a Magnifico” as well as in “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”: “When the blackbird flew out of sight, / It marked the edge / Of one of many circles” (CP 94). Distinguishing between the intellect’s work of “manufacturing” and the intuition’s work of “organization,” or between a manufactured thing and a creation (by nature or by the artist), Bergson invokes the same metaphor of a series of circles expanding from a center:

To manufacture . . . is to work from the periphery to the centre, or, as the philosophers say, from the many to the one. Organization, on the contrary, works from the centre to the periphery. It begins in a point that is almost a mathematical point, and spreads around this point by concentric waves which go on enlarging . . . . The organizing act [the artistic act] . . . has something explosive about it: it needs at the beginning the smallest possible place, a minimum of matter, as if the organizing forces only entered space reluctantly. (CE 92)

That Stevens’ idea of the real and its perception is indebted to Bergson’s concept Stevens makes clear in The Necessary Angel, where he quotes Bergson’s analysis, in Creative Evolution, of a motionless object:

Bergson describes the visual perception of a motionless object as the most stable of internal states. He says: “The object may remain the same, I may look at it from the same side, at the same angle, in the same light; nevertheless, the vision I now have of it differs from that which I have just had, even if only because the one is an instant later than the other. My memory is there, which conveys something of the past into the present.” (NA 24–25)

Since what we perceive as reality’s substantiality is just an infinite series of vibrations, our perception of it is equally unstable and mobile. Reality is the subject matter of poetry, but Stevens, like Bergson, understands reality not as a “collection of solid, static objects extended in space, . . . the
space [being] blank space, nowhere, without color, and . . . the objects, though solid, hav[ing] no shadows and, though static, exert[ing] a mournful power” (NA 31), but as the life lived in the external scene thus composed.

The metaphysician in “The Curtains in the House of the Metaphysician” is oblivious to motion as the unity in which everything participates. “[A]ll motion / Is beyond” the metaphysician, as he is only concerned with “bar[ing] / The last largeness, bold to see” (CP 62). Motion is the substratum of the material world:

the drifting of these curtains
Is full of long motions; as the ponderous
Deflations of distance; or as clouds
Inseparable from their afternoons;
Or the changing of light. . . . (CP 62)

The clouds are inseparable from their afternoons because the clouds, a particular substance, participate in the general movement that underlies everything. Clouds have a duration relative to that of afternoons. Time is not a sequence of positions but is indivisible, and as it is the substratum of everything, things, too, are indivisible and have no identity except in terms of one another. The intellectual representation of movement, on the other hand, always reduces time to “a series of positions,” i.e., to substance, forgetting that “the mobile exists . . . in each of the points of the line it is moving along” (Bergson, CM 15).

V. Reflection and Refraction

The relationship of perception to imagination in Stevens is analogous to the relationship of matter to perception in Bergson. The question of the relationship between reality and imagination in Stevens is a restatement of the question Bergson asks in Matter and Memory:

How is it that the same images can belong at the same time to two different systems: one in which each image varies for itself and in the well-defined measure that it is patient of the real action of surrounding images; and another in which all images change for a single image and in the varying measure that they reflect the eventual action of this privileged image? (25)

Perception does not add anything to the object perceived since both the object and its perception are essentially images. Just as perception is nothing more than matter reflected back upon itself, so the unreal (the object of the imagination, or the poetic image) is the real reflected back upon itself, i.e., intensified. The unreal is the real thought and felt so intensely that thought and feeling have become a part of the real, transforming it into a “subtlety.”
Bergson’s “eccentric” definition of matter opens *Matter and Memory*: “Matter, in our view, is an aggregate of ‘images.’ And by ‘image’ we mean a certain existence which is more than that which the idealist calls a *representation*, but less than that which the realist calls a *thing*—an existence placed halfway between the ‘thing’ and the ‘representation’” (9). Material objects or “images,” bathed in “a colorless light” (35), exist in a network of indifference: “Indifferent to each other because of the radical mechanism which binds them together, they present each to the others all their sides at once: which means that they act and react mutually by all their elements, and that none of them perceives or is perceived consciously” (37).

The relations between images are likened to the phenomenon of refraction, which excludes the possibility for a virtual image to detach itself as a picture from the actual image. Only in the case of the image that is our body does this refraction turn into reflection and the actual produce its own virtual image:

> When a ray of light passes from one medium into another, it usually traverses it with a change of direction. But the respective densities of the two media may be such that, for a given angle of incidence, refraction is no longer possible. Then we have total reflection. The luminous point gives rise to a *virtual* image which symbolizes, so to speak, the fact that the luminous rays cannot pursue their way. Perception is just a phenomenon of the same kind . . . [wherein] the rays . . . instead of passing through . . . will appear to be reflected and thus to indicate the outlines of the object which emits them. There is nothing positive here, nothing added to the image, nothing new. . . . Perception therefore [conscious perception] resembles those phenomena of reflexion which result from an impeded refraction; it is like an effect of mirage. (37)

Bergson suggests here that perception is the virtual aspect of the actual “image” or material object. The actual exists independently of the virtual: “images” do not need to be perceived in order to be.

In “Stars at Tallapoosa,” Stevens offers a vision of the world independent of our perception that is strikingly similar to Bergson’s idea of the world as an “aggregate of images.” Conscious perception in Stevens’ poem is excluded from the world: “The body is no body to be seen / But is an eye that studies its black lid” (*CP* 71). The eye is not yet open, consciousness has not yet broken into “universal consciousness” or matter. The world is no more than a grid, on which one and the same lines “fall without diverging” (*CP* 72), just as, in Bergson’s model, images send out rays that are merely refracted off the surface of other images. The stars in Stevens’ poem are Bergson’s “images”: “A sheaf of brilliant arrows flying straight,
Flying and falling straightway for their pleasure, / Their pleasure that is all bright-edged and cold” (CP 72).

Reflection and refraction define the relationship not only between perception and matter but also between imagination and perception. Valéry’s comparison of the poem to a diamond repeats Bergson’s observation of the objectivity of perception, extending it to poetry:

“Diamant.—Sa beauté résulte, me dit-on, de la petitesse de l’angle de réflexion totale . . . La tailleur de diamant en façonne les facettes de manière que le rayon qui pénètre dans la gemme par l’une d’elles ne peut en sortir que par la même—D’où le feu et l’éclat. Belle image de ce que je pense sur la poésie: retour du rayon spirituel aux mots d’entrée. (Valéry qtd. in Macksey 223)

[The diamond—Its beauty, I am told, results from the extremely small angle of total reflection . . . The maker of diamonds works on its sides in such a manner that the ray of light that penetrates the gem through one of its sides can get out only through that same side.—Hence the fire and the brilliance. A beautiful image that expresses my thoughts about poetry: the return of the ray of spirit to the entrance of words. (My translation)

A “particular,” to use Stevens’ terminology, or an “image,” to use Bergson’s, leaves its impression on the mind, which is just another “image” in the “aggregate of images.” Instead of being refracted off the mind, the object = image is reflected back upon itself and retrospectively outlines its own contours. The object = image “splits” into two: the actual object and its virtual aspect, which remains locked in the mind, as the ray of light is locked in the gem. In writing a poem, the poet’s aim is to make it into a diamond. He attains the real whenever the actual (the particular) enters the poem and cannot leave it except through the same entrance, creating a reflection within the poem—the virtual is precisely this reflection—in which the actual coincides with the virtual. This means that there is a certain transparency between the actual image and its virtual reflection in the language of the poem: “The word must be the thing it represents[,] otherwise it is a symbol” (OP 194).

Poetry functions like perception: both originate in the material world, whether that is made up of Bergson’s “images” or Stevens’ real things. The reality or objectivity of perception is suggested, for example, in the poem “Tattoo.” The material world, in the poem, is “bathed” in light. As light “crawls over” things (water, snow), it also “crawls under your eyelids / And spreads its webs there— / Its two webs” (CP 81). Perception is analogous to the original source of light, and, to the extent that the material world is already in the light, it is also in our perception. External perception originates in the material world and is intimately connected to our body: “The webs of your eyes / Are fastened / To the flesh and bones
of you / As to rafters or grass” (CP 81). To think of the mind, or of the imagination, as separate from the material world is to reduce the imagination to a mere simulacrum of the world. The unreal is not a simulacrum of the real but appears as such only when its materiality is denied. As Stevens says in “To the One of Fictive Music”:

Now, of the music summoned by the birth
That separates us from the wind and sea,
Yet leaves us in them, until earth becomes,
By being so much of the things we are,
Gross effigy and simulacrum. . . . (CP 87)

VI. Resemblances: Imagination and Memory

Stevens’ imagination is turned both backward and forward: it starts from the real, out of it creates the unreal, but that unreal makes possible new ways of seeing, so that the unreal creates the real. This process is repeated infinitely, the unreal decreated from the real, the unreal creating a new reality, which in turn is decreated into the unreal. But this is exactly what memory does in Bergson’s theory: it enriches perception, then condenses it into memory-images, stores those and releases them to enrich new perceptions. Memory propels the past into the future; the imagination propels the unreal, which it has distilled from the real, back into the real.

The relation between pure memory and perception has the form of analogy: a memory has to be matched to a present perception. In the same way, in poetry an object is referred to the multiplicity of aspects constituting its materiality so that the most apposite of these virtual versions of the object can be chosen. The actual is related to its virtual aspects the way perception is related to memory—by analogy. Formally, then, poetry (metaphor) is analogous to the structure of our mental life as described by Bergson.

Although poetry is the subtilizing of reality, its dematerialization, it is not correct to say that the poem moves from a thing to an idea of the thing. To understand abstraction, which plays a crucial role in Stevens’ theory of poetry, we need to understand the process by which ideas are formed. Here we refer to Bergson’s account of that process. The formation of a general idea requires the elimination from an image of the details of time and place, but the reflection on those details already presupposes noticing differences, i.e., a memory of images. Thus, Bergson claims,

we start neither from the perception of the individual nor from the conception of the genus, but from an intermediate knowledge, from a confused sense of the striking quality or of resemblance: this sense, equally remote from generality fully
conceived and from individuality clearly perceived, begets both of them by a process of dissociation. (MM 158)

Bergson here suggests that the particular (perception) and the abstract (intellect) are both rooted in resemblance. The poet does not start from the thing as such but from an intermediary stage, from a vaguely sensed resemblance, “a similarity felt and lived, . . . a similarity which is automatically acted” and thus different from “a similarity intelligently perceived, or thought” that results in the formation of a concept (Bergson, MM 160).

The perception of the individual objects resembling each other, as well as the general idea that classes together similar objects, is produced from this sense of resemblance by a process of dissociation. Metaphor (resemblance) being the trope of poetry, we can say that poetry is the condition of both perception and conception, which are dissociated from it. Metaphor, though it requires that the poet abstract himself from reality, is not an abstraction. Rather, it oscillates between a particular and an abstraction. The general idea, says Bergson, oscillates between perception and memory. Resemblance, then, oscillates between the real and the unreal. Stevens suggests as much when he claims, “There is no such thing as a metaphor of a metaphor. One does not progress through metaphors. Thus reality is the indispensable element of each metaphor. When I say that man is a god it is very easy to see that if I also say that a god is something else, god has become reality” (OP 204).

Poetry cannot alienate itself from the real because the second term in a metaphor, that which establishes the resemblance and creates the unreal, automatically slips into the position of the first term, the real, from which the metaphor started and thus becomes real in its turn only because it occupies the position of the real. It is as if the very form of the metaphor guarantees the adherence of poetry to reality. The vitality of poetry derives from the form of analogy constituting it. In “Hibiscus on the Sleeping Shores,” for example, Stevens not only establishes a resemblance (mind/moth), but once the resemblance is established, Stevens can take the second term (moth) and talk about it in a such a way that it remains unclear whether the rest of the poem refers to the mind or to the moth. The poem does not consider one of the terms as a symbol of the other but oscillates between the two equally credible alternatives suggested by the two terms. The metaphorical is incorporated back into the real from which it sprang, instead of turning into a mere symbol easily disengaged from its real counterpart. The decreated is incorporated back into the real, from which it was produced by a process of dissociation. As the real splits, the unreal detaches itself from it as a picture.

Since memory, as Bergson shows, is always a part of perception, the material world becomes immaterial. Thus, the nature of perception itself—the fact that it is always informed by memory—dematerializes or subtilizes the world (without, however, destroying its reality) and makes it readily
lend itself to imagination. Although Stevens does not explicitly consider the relationship between imagination and memory, it is significant that all the examples he gives of resemblances involve memory. Resemblance occurs when something reminds us of something else, as, for example, when “[t]he wig of a particular man reminds us of some particular man and resembles him . . . [o]r a strand of a child’s hair brings back the whole child and in that way resembles the child” (NA 75). Metaphor then seems to be based on recollection. One is immediately reminded of Wordsworth’s definition of poetry as “emotion recollected in tranquility” (Preface 328), but whereas this definition emphasizes the emotional resemblance of poetry, as a kind of melancholia, to memory—although it is true that Stevens himself says that poetry is “a form of melancholia” (OP 188)—Stevens suggests that the very structure of poetry—metaphor being the form of poetry as metamorphosis—is that of memory. Memory is the imagination of the past and perception is the imagination of the future, the possibilities of things: “We cannot look at the past or the future except by means of the imagination” (NA 144).

The relationship between the unreal and the real in Stevens’ theory is analogous to that between the past and the present in Bergson’s. The past, according to Bergson, cannot be used up but it constantly expands as new perspectives on it emerge in the present. The intellect does not understand this because it is retrospective:

It cannot help throwing present realities, reduced to possibilities or virtualities, back into the past, so that what is compounded now must, in its eyes, always have been so. It does not admit that a simple state can, in remaining what it is, become a compound state solely because evolution will have created new viewpoints from which to consider it. (CM 27)

The intellect “does not accept the idea of an indistinct and even undivided multiplicity, purely intensive or qualitative, which, while remaining what it is, will comprise an indefinitely increasing number of elements, as the new points of view for considering it appear in the world” (CM 28).

Just as the present is never fully given or eternal but is continually enriched by the past, which is itself never useless, dead, so the real, in Stevens’ theory of the imagination, is never given but continually complemented by the imagination, by the possible. The material world cannot be used up since new thoughts/words keep appearing. These are not added to a reality already given and fixed but are simply brought into the open from the obscurity that accompanies perception as a process of selection. The unreal, insofar as it is defined as words without things, is already contained in the real and the real is continually giving birth to the unreal by purging itself: “Poetry is a purging of the world’s poverty,” notes Stevens (OP 193). Just as memory expands our psychic life, of which it is a part, so the un-
real, or the imagination, or poetry, expands reality by thinking and feeling “the things that are there” in new ways.

Yet the imagination cannot be absolutely identified with memory. Poetry, through its metaphors, reveals the real nature of matter (substance) as motion, which remains obscured in perception as a result of the work of memory. In this respect, the imagination acts as a resistance to memory, memory having solidified the fundamental mobility or subtlety of the world. To criticize the mechanistic view of perception that reduces the world to a scene, in which objects are extended in space, possessing certain attributes that are somehow added to their substance, Bergson offers an analysis of light, which for him is a constant. His aim is to illustrate through a rigorous scientific analysis that what we perceive as substance is in fact the condensation of an infinite number of vibrations, i.e., that movement is constitutive of the real and that any spatial explanation of the nature of the real excludes movement:

Take, for example, a luminous point P, of which the rays impinge on the different parts a, b, c, of the retina. At this point P, science localizes vibrations of a certain amplitude and duration. At the same point P, consciousness perceives light . . . [which shows that] there is no essential difference between the light and the movements, provided we restore to movement the unity, indivisibility, and qualitative heterogeneity denied to it by abstract mechanics; provided also that we see in sensible qualities contractions effected by our memory. (MM 41)

What is the significance of this idea—the idea that substance and attributes differ in degree, not in kind—for Stevens’ theory of poetry? We find an illustration of it in “Domination of Black,” for example, where Stevens establishes a resemblance between an object (leaves) and an attribute (the color of the leaves). What allows Stevens to “isolate” an attribute of an object and compare it to the object itself? If light is composed of vibrations, if its essence is movement, then any object must be thought of in the same way as a concentration of vibrations “of a certain amplitude and duration.” Therefore, what is perceived as leaves is actually the movement of colors that is so condensed that it appears to us as a solid object. The discrimination between solid objects and their attributes is merely the inevitable result of memory condensing vibrations into sensible qualities.

VII. Example

In “Domination of Black,” the basic tenets of Stevens’ theory of poetry and its relation to Bergson’s theory of perception and memory come together. The poem starts from what Stevens calls “a particular”—the leaves—and, despite a proliferation of resemblances that create a slight transcendence, adheres to the real in which it originates. The resemblances
originate in the material world but, as one resemblance is not only extended into a new one—extended forward—but also extended retrospectively backward, adding new nuances to the resemblances already established earlier in the poem, the series of affinities moves naturally from the immediate, the visible, the sensory to the invisible, the unreal, so that eventually the affinities exist not only in the eye but also in “the other eye” (CP 448), as Stevens phrases it in “The Bouquet.”

The affinities perceived in the mind, however, are not added to those in the eye; they are just the latter’s intensifications. The affinities in the material world become possible thanks to a source of light: the fire in the room. James Baird finds a connection between the continuity between eye and mind in Stevens’ theory and George Santayana’s reflections on sight in The Sense of Beauty: “‘Sight . . . is a method of presenting psychically what is practically absent; and as the essence of the thing is its existence in our absence, the thing is spontaneously conceived in terms of sight’” (Santa-
yana qtd. in Baird 129). The image, then, is the natural psychic equivalent of the materiality of a thing, which we take to be its essence. The priority of sight in the real world is transferred to the realm of the imagination. Since both perception and imagination are equally determined by sight, they differ only in degree, not in kind. Bergson is justified in calling objects “images” since we determine the essence of a thing in terms of sight and thus we turn it into an image. “Domination of Black” begins in the immediacy of perception (the colors of the leaves), which is then complicated and extended through a series of analogies pointing out resemblances between the things perceived, until the perception becomes the occasion for a recollection (just as in Bergson, perception is an occasion for memory to try to slide in its images), which in turn complicates the already begun series of resemblances.

The colors of the leaves turning in the room (even though the leaves themselves are supposedly outside) is the first term in the series of affinities. The colors, turning, resemble the leaves, which, too, are turning. The basis of the resemblance is motion itself. Color, supposedly an attribute of a solid object (the leaves), is abstracted from substance and the leaves’ materiality dissolves into subtlety: “The thing seen becomes the thing unseen” (OP 193). The imagination functions like light: it does not add anything to the object perceived. Light, as Baird observes, is for Stevens “a constant of reality,” but the imagination is “the faculty capable of varying the appearances of phenomena in the act of seeing” (120). Light being the only constant, it becomes possible to dissolve the substance/quality distinction and to make of the two terms analogues. A material thing (leaves) is subtilized into a quality, color, while the supposedly immaterial quality acquires an independent existence. If the spontaneous method of the mind in Santayana’s doctrine is “the act of presenting psychically what is absent” (Baird 130), Stevens’ subtilizing of reality, in the process of which his language expands the significance of the object (Baird 130), aims at re-
turning the object to the original flux of reality from which perception has isolated it.

Although the poem starts from a particular (the leaves), this particular is abstracted as memory intervenes and affects the original perception of the leaves. The beginning of the poem suggests that night has already come, but the end of the poem undermines this: “I saw how the night came” (CP 9). The difference between the perception with which the poem starts and the modified perception with which it ends is the difference between ordinary perception and its intensification by the imagination. The difference has been accumulating throughout the poem through an interchanging of different parts of speech. Metaphors are constructed by simply varying the syntax as when, for example, the verb “turn” is applied to different nouns (“leaves,” “colors,” “tails,” “flames,” “planets”) or the verb “stride” to both “colors” and “the night.” The effect this juggling with language achieves—an effect of mobility, instability, dizziness—is naturally translated into a mobility of the real objects of perception.

The mobility of language is paralleled by the mobility of the phenomenal world. Language ceases to be a medium and becomes transparent. The poem starts from a perception, the perception becomes the occasion for a memory (the memory of the peacocks, which itself is already broken down into a series of resemblances), the memory is matched to the perception and thus made analogous to it, then the memory itself is affected by the perception that occasioned it so that the resemblances in the perception are extended into the memory. Finally, the poem returns to the perception from which it started, and the original perception, now complicated by the memory, produces an emotional response in the speaker (fear). The speaker now remembers the peacocks again, only this time, he remembers consciously—unlike the first time when his memory was involuntary—and “understands” his emotional response.

The poem comes full circle as the speaker realizes how his memory has informed his perception. The imagination has played a crucial role in this process, since it is only because the original perception is already imaginative (as the similes in the first stanza suggest) that the involuntary memory starts pushing into the perception and even replaces it in the first and the second stanza. The poet’s perception of a real object stimulates memory, which then alters the perception retrospectively, i.e., it “explains” how the speaker saw the night coming. However, the poem does not distinguish between perception and memory—only our analysis does that. The duration of the speaker’s ego remains an “indivisible and indestructible continuity of a melody where the past enters into the present and forms with it an undivided whole. . . . We have the intuition of it; but as soon as we seek an intellectual representation of it we line up, one after another, states which have becomes distinct like the beads of a necklace” (Bergson, CM 83).
VIII. Light

The poem attests to the privileged status of vision in Stevens’ poetry. Light, by itself, creates the unity whereby every object participates in every other object. Light is also the basis of Bergson’s ontology in Matter and Memory. Bergson’s ontology is an example of what Stevens calls a poetic philosophical idea. Indeed, with its suggestion to view matter as luminous and the relationship between things as expressible in terms of rays of light refracting off one another, Bergson’s ontology provides a perfect illustration of what Stevens calls the transformation of “substance [in]to subtlety” (NA 174). The only difference is that, whereas in Bergson this subtlety is a fundamental characteristic of reality, for Stevens this subtlety is the work of the imagination. The difference is slight since the imagination itself is a fundamental characteristic of the real. The Bergsonian impressionistic universe of rays interconnecting and intercutting is analogous to Stevens’ vision of the real as a realm of infinitely proliferating resemblances. The relevance of Bergson’s “imagistic” ontology to Stevens lies in the analogy Stevens himself draws between light and the imagination. The imagination’s relationship to the world is analogous to that of light to objects: “Like light, it adds nothing, except itself” (NA 61). The imagination is not an addition to reality: “To be at the end of fact is not to be at the beginning of the imagination but it is to be at the end of both” (OP 200).

The role of light is to establish all things as one, participating in one another. Light is the constant, the unifying substratum not only in the real world, where it puts objects at certain distances from one another, but also in the imagination, where resemblances are again a function of distance (distance being the effect of light), which determines the degree of difference or similarity between objects: “the light alone creates a unity not only in the recedings of distance, where differences become invisible, but also in contacts of closer sight” (NA 71). Light places objects at various distances from one another and at the same time provides the constant with respect to which these distances can vary, so that objects are more or less related to one another.

Resemblances among things are possible because all things are “bathed” in the same light. Resemblance in metaphor is not mimetic; i.e., it is not mere identity, identity being “the vanishing-point of resemblance” (NA 72). Natural resemblances between things are produced by the light’s effects on things. Similarly, the vision of the mind, which is an analogue of that of the physical eye, produces a network of distances and out of those distances or resemblances, it produces things that resemble each other. The resemblances in poetry are analogous to natural resemblances since their sources—the eye and “the other eye”—are analogous. The resemblances between things that poetry posits are “one of the significant components of the structure of reality” (NA 72). The objectivity of the world proceeds from the inhumanity, the impersonality and constancy of light,
which is both the source of life and the source of imagination. In “Nu-
ances of a Theme by Williams,” Stevens celebrates the reality of light, which, 
though things vary in it, does not vary itself.

In “Sea Surface Full of Clouds,” the sea is the only real object and the 
rest of the world in the poem is “created” by the light and its effect on the 
sea:

Who, then, in that ambrosial latitude
Out of the light evolved the moving blooms,
Who, then, evolved the sea-blooms from the clouds . . . ?

( CP 99)

The work of light on the sea surface is enough to produce a network of 
refractions and reflections and, out of that, other objects. The clouds in the 
sky are not objects existing side by side with the sea, as separate objects 
with identifiable borders, but are a part of the sea simply by way of the 
light’s effect on the sea. The light needs only one object to create various 
degrees of distance and thus to situate the object in a position relative to 
other objects, which exist at different distances from that one object.

The materiality both of perception and of the imagination is suggested 
Including the Speaker—”: “All things in the sun are sun” ( CP 104)—as well 
as in “Valley Candle,” in which the candle and its image are the same: the 
beams of the night converge upon the candle and its image in the same 
way. The light of the candle (whether it signifies perception or imagina-
tion) is not something that illuminates the world or creates it; rather, the 
world is the candle’s source of light.

IX. Conclusion

Poetry is the life of the mind fulfilled in the highest intensity of thought 
and feeling. Any object, once intensely thought and felt, is lifted up from 
the materiality of the world and becomes a poetic image, participating in 
the life of the imagination. If all of the material world could thus be lifted 
up, life would coincide with poetry. This lifting up of the object is not the 
same as merely poeticizing it: this would reduce poetry to the romantic, 
which disparages poetry. The object is not beautified or idolized but puri-
ified, made lighter, seen as part of a continuity of changes and movements. 
It is no longer a solid, heavy, immobile object extended in space and exter-
nal to other objects, but all other objects participate in it as it participates 
in them.

Poetry, for Stevens, does what intuition does for Bergson: “It represents 
the attention that the mind gives to itself, over and above, while it is fixed 
upon matter, its object” ( CM 92). Poetry, Bergson says, is the “ ‘esprit de 
finesse’ . . . the reflection of the intuition in the intellect” ( CM 94), an in-
tensification of life. Poems are things thought and felt to their fullest. The
relationship between reality and the imagination is not one of transposition or translation but one of intensification. Poetry is life in its most concentrated or condensed form. The poet does not create a transcendent world, but the world of the imagination is decreated from the real world: "Thus poetry becomes and is a transcendent analogue composed of the particulars of reality, created by the poet’s sense of the world, that is to say, his attitude, as he intervenes and interposes the appearances of that sense" (NA 130).

Since a poet’s sense of the world is a matter of biology, the transcendence he achieves remains vital, real, not metaphysical. It is the transformation of substance into subtlety. In Stevens’ theory every difference dissolves into a difference of degree. The imagination and the intellect are intimately related, resemblance being their common ground. The imagination is analogous to perception, “an activity like seeing things or hearing things or any other sensory activity” (NA 145). Stevens is interested not only in the imagination as it is revealed in the arts but also in the imagination as a sensory activity, as an everyday kind of metaphysics, as constitutive of perception and a basis for the formation of concepts. According to Bergson, in perception we determine things as our possibilities for action. Stevens’ definition of the imagination is similar: “The imagination is the power of the mind over the possibilities of things” (NA 136). Stevens and Bergson agree that the indetermination and mobility of the material world constitute its spirituality. “[P]ure change,” writes Bergson, “. . . is a thing spiritual or impregnated with spirituality. . . . Its real domain being the spirit, it [intuition or, in Stevens’ case, art] would seek to grasp in things, even material things, their participation in spirituality” (CM 37).

Joseph Carroll’s book-length study of Stevens’ “New Romanticism” treats Stevens’ poetic development as “a struggle to overcome the metaphysical limitations of a simple dualism and to achieve a poetic absolute” (1). Carroll rejects both the already entrenched static dualistic reading of Stevens and its postmodern interpretation, which argues that “all modern poetry is [a] ‘quest for wholeness’ . . . [that] always, necessarily fails” (2). Instead, Carroll reads Stevens’ poetry as a revelation of “a latent principle of spiritual fulfillment . . . [that] can be activated through the fictions of poetry” (4). The present study of some of the Bergsonian elements in Stevens’ theory of the imagination has shown why poetry, for Stevens, was not a failed attempt to overcome a dualism he accepted as a necessary premise, but indeed the revelation of the reality of the imagination and of the lightness and subtlety of the material world.

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Notes

1 In “The Relations between Poetry and Painting,” this word is misspelled as “sublety” (NA 174). For the sake of clarity, I have corrected the spelling throughout my essay.

Works Cited


Good, Bad, and Supreme Risks: Wallace Stevens’ Surety Claim On/Against the Death of the Father

JOHN BECKMAN

A claim man is constantly separating the good from the bad.
—Wallace Stevens, “Surety and Fidelity Claims”

Money is a kind of poetry.
—Wallace Stevens, “Adagia”

ON MAY 21, 1899, Garrett B. Stevens, a recreational poet and soon-to-be-bankrupt businessman, wrote to his son who had just been made president of Harvard’s Signet Club:

Dear Wallace— Just what the election to the Signet signifies I have no sign. It is significant that your letter is a signal to sign another check that you may sigh no more. I suppose you thus win the privilege to wear a seal ring or a badge with the picture of a Cygnet on it—to distinguish you from commoner geese, or it may be you can consign all studies designed to cause resignation, to some assigned port where they will trouble you no more.

You will know more about it when you have ridden the goat of initiation, and kneaded the dough enclosed.

Keep hammering at your real work however my boy—for a fellow never knows what’s in store—and time mis-spent now counts heavily.

Yours as ever
G. B. S. (L 26)

This “Signet” letter, for all its didacticism, may resemble many others the young poet received from his father while at college, and yet it is singular for its self-conscious tinkering with language and for its deceptively playful sense of play. The language is both conservative and unbridled, even mildly tormented. The father who writes it is both instructive and cynical, playful and competitive. It is almost as though he were sparing
the child by taking out his aggressions on the rascally “sign.” Most significantly, and ironically, he hounds his son to be cautious and careful, and yet he does so with a letter that itself is thoroughly run through with risk—financial risks, semantic risks, paternal risks. This one curious “Signet” letter, for all its hazards, will serve a magnifying glass by which we can trace a patrimony of torment and rebellion reappearing throughout the life work of Wallace Stevens, in his capacities both as insurance lawyer and modernist poet. By following the many strains of risk, both financial and semantic, that anxiously undermine the father’s work and play, we can better speculate on the volatile market of Wallace Stevens, an insurance lawyer whose commitment to the “certainty” of capitalism and a poet whose investment in “Supreme Fictions” of the imagination demanded that he simultaneously took risks against, as well as surety claims on, the security of the father. What results is a theory of the risky sign and of the risky father that can be gleaned from a reading of his insurance essays alongside his 1942 masterpiece “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction.” The paternal laws of capital that sustain Wallace Stevens’ theory of economics simultaneously leech vitality from his poetry, and although both endeavors, as I shall argue, depend fundamentally upon the selfsame risk—the risk of the sign—each at the same time puts the other in jeopardy. It ultimately takes the poet’s disillusionment during World War II for him to acknowledge the most daunting demands and hazards of the Father, and to acknowledge the dignity of risk and play—semantic, poetic, political—over empty myths of certainty and truth.

**The risk of the father:**

“A fellow never knows what’s in store”

It is profitable to read this “Signet” letter in exchange with two texts by Jacques Derrida and Jean-Joseph Goux, both written at a time when these figures were associated with the leftist Tel Quel group in Paris. In both “Plato’s Pharmacy” by Derrida and *Symbolic Economies* by Goux, the myth of the father is cast in economic terms, such that for both philosophers the father exists at a point of remove, a point where he is characterized by invisibility, absence, and death, and whence he proliferates exchange as the seminal figure of capital. By both philosophers’ accounts, the father’s worth as “capital” is contingent upon this permanent remove, for on the one hand (as the myth goes) his sublime presence is forbidden from sight, and likewise, on the other hand, only by this myth of an absolute source of value can the trust of a fragile economy hope to be maintained. Little is at stake outside the realm of the dead father, so Derrida and Goux work very much within it, factoring its variables for both play and profit and dicing on nothing less than the father’s murder.

“G. B. S.” is literally the poet’s father. But if in his “Signet” letter, and in several similar to it, he is at the same time playing the role of a bountiful father, that of an ideal father outside of himself, it is necessary to wonder
what ideal father he is pretending to be. Goux offers a strong possibility. In his Lacanian/Marxist critique of capitalism, Goux cites a common assumption that puts the father in the place of the “paternal metaphor (money, phallus, language, monarch), the central and centralizing metaphor that anchors all other metaphors, the fulcrum of all symbolic legislation, the locus of the [gold] standard and of unity, totemically implanted in the center of the tribal space” (21). For Goux, the father, like gold, becomes the supreme place-marker for value within an economy—big shoes for “G. B. S.” or any father to fill. Nevertheless, speaking as he does here in declarative sentences, full as he is of advice and money, G. B. S. plays his role with confidence and aplomb. He masquerades as “central” and ridicules his son for being eccentric.

Yet he anxiously wears the pants of the Alma Pater: twice in five sentences, he glibly refers to the “enclosed” check that highlights his own stability as the man who can finance the “initiation” of his “sigh[ing]” son. True, as a figure of absence, represented only by his letters and the money enclosed, he does uphold the trust of that invisible abundance that makes the father, in Goux’s formulation, an equivalent of the gold standard. But then, by calling attention to his own symbolic function (that he has “sign[ed] another check”), he all at once excludes himself from that very same equivalence, for he aligns himself not with the mysterious value of gold but rather with what Goux calls its “relative form”—with money, checks, the unstable symbols whose difference from gold ensures its value as a stable commodity. Just as checks and money necessarily counterfeit the gold they are meant to represent, the name “G. B. S.” counterfeits on the immensity of the paternal metaphor. Structurally, both are bad copies. And so, to follow Goux’s argument through, we see that the symbolic father (“G. B. S.”) signs his letters and signs his checks only to expose his own real-life vulnerability to castration and to ensure the imaginary and exclusive value of the phallus/dead father in its function as the “general equivalent” of family and social law (23).

Garrett Stevens’ two signatory gestures (the check and the letter), though intending to invest the father with confidence, actually reveal how much he is at risk—at risk of bankruptcy, at risk of castration. The power invested in Name of the Father, which is metonymically related to the Law within Lacanian psychoanalysis, attenuates into the ink-trail of the father’s signature. Just as gold and the phallus must remain invisible in order to retain their power, so must the Name of the Father, if it is to retain its magic, be neither spoken nor written: it must never be counterfeited by the risky sign. This condition would come as no surprise to G. B. S., given the warning that he himself thematizes throughout the letter to his son by literally underscoring the sign’s lawless play.

The letter’s aggressive wordplay, then, has a compelling effect. It lays bare the shiftlessness of a property (poetry) upon which he fears his son might try to build a career—not real property, he seems to say, but that of
the elusive sign that, as he demonstrates, has countless properties, none of them substantial. For this reason, the playful paragraph is followed by an unequivocal statement, lest the wordplay be taken too seriously: “Keep hammering at your real work.”

But can even this “real work,” work that is presumably aimed at profit-making, be taken any more seriously? Not if the son has read the letter closely. For here the father exposes his own dependence, and the dependence of his hard-earned fortune, on the selfsame sign he sets out to mock. The stuff of profit is no more “real” than the sign: By reveling in the sign’s free play, by making its instability so very seductive, G. B. S. implores his son to link this proliferation of the fickle sign with his own dissemination of the paternal wealth, that precarious fund that he liberally distributes by dint of the signature itself. What is a check, after all, if not just another sign? another sigh? And is not the “good” check merely the precondition of a “bad” check? What the playful “Signet” letter signifies, therefore, is not the stability of a “central and centralizing” dead father, but rather the risk of a supplementary father who recklessly flaunts the weapons that would be his own undoing.

What sense is the son to make of all this? Jacques Derrida offers the means to a solution. Although working within the space of Plato’s Phaedrus, as opposed to Lacan’s Ecrits, it seems that Derrida would agree with Goux to the extent that he factors “The good (father, sun, capital)” as “the hidden illuminating, blinding source of logos” (“Plato’s Pharmacy” 82), and thus establishes in slightly different terms a similar notion of a “paternal metaphor.” (He is not specifically interested in Jacques Lacan’s “paternal metaphor,” the dead-father-turned-law that Goux invokes, but rather in the dead father as a transcendental signified that assures the myth of a true and basic meaning.) Moreover, by factoring in the role of the son, Derrida helps us to expand our schema into the unpredictable realm of patrimony. He speaks of the son in economic terms: “As product, the tokos is the child, the human or animal brood, as well as the fruits of the seed sown in the field, and the interest on a capital investment: it is a return or revenue” (“Plato’s Pharmacy” 82). And thus we begin to understand the urgency that pervades the “Signet” letter: By advising his son to live sensibly, G. B. S. hopes to ensure some revenue while protecting his investment against more risk somewhere further down the line.

But is this extension of the metaphor appropriate to my present inquiry? Since G. B. S.’s contribution to the “paternal metaphor” can be reduced to little more than a trace, would not any return on such an investment be negligible? Yes and no. Yes, the absolute value of young Wallace Stevens’ inheritance (as a “token” of the father) may be, in substance, sadly commensurate with the checks he receives through the mail at college. But the less obvious inheritance, and the ultimately more valuable one, is his reverence for the myth of a paternal good—the trust that he can somehow protect both wealth and meaning against the dastardly risk of the sign.
For this reason, he too must be indebted to performing the “real work” necessary to perpetuate the father’s myth.

If the solution were this simple, however, the son would merely be a duplicate of the father. As a result, he too may have gone bankrupt, faded into oblivion. However, we know from history that the son made good on his father’s many risks. Unlike G. B. S., who was eventually consumed by the risk of the sign (his bicycle company soon collapsed, his private poetry went unread), Wallace Stevens became vice president of Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company, and he won two National Book Awards, the Bolingen and Pulitzer prizes. This unlikely return on the father’s investment calls for a new set of terms: whereas the *good risk*, the “real work,” that which demands a profit for all its “hammering” away, strives to keep the paternal metaphor intact, the *bad risk*, the risk of the sign, is that which threatens the paternal metaphor by perpetually calling it into question. Though Stevens found himself open to all risks, at least as a “claim man” he knew how to keep them, in his words, “separat[e]” (OP 237). He showed his father’s guilty affinity for risks both “good” and “bad,” but he ultimately refused to choose between the two.

**THE GOOD SON:**

“KEEP HAMMERING AT YOUR REAL WORK HOWEVER MY BOY”

By the year 1937, Wallace Stevens had “ridden the goat of initiation,” and he knew all about the risks of capital and the high costs of paternity. At 58, he himself had been a literal father for many years. And he had not only been a successful player in the risk business, but he had even succeeded throughout the Great Depression, years when the bounteous father of capitalism had been universally demystified. Always acting the “token” of G. B. S., Stevens held tight to the faith of his inheritance, and in this year wrote an essay for the *Hartford Agent* that encouraged his colleagues to do the same.

In “Insurance and Social Change,” he seductively appeals to the current need for certainty, insisting that the certainty of “regular income,” the great promise of the Social Security Act of 1935, does not really make for “perfect” insurance (OP 233–34), which is Stevens’ name for his utopian vision of absolute world coverage. He implies two possible versions of this utopia, one wherein risks are eliminated altogether and another where they can be turned into profit. A poet forever haunted by images of dead permanence, Stevens offers a cynical vision of the risk-free utopia, evoking the dismal “paradise” of his early masterpiece “Sunday Morning”: without risk, he says, people would “go on indefinitely like the wax flow- ers on the mantelpiece” (OP 234). Yet, on the other hand, he seems naturally inclined toward the second utopia—a place where inevitable risk turns into money—for it resembles Stevens’ rosy reality at the time, as both successful insurance lawyer and poet.
Stevens does not hide the elitism in his premise that “insurance for all” (social security) is quite different from, and less desirable than, an “insurance for everything” (luxury insurance); he tantalizes his peers with it, announcing, “The truth is that we may well be entering an insurance era” (OP 234), an era when the insurance worker, canny and cautious enough to fend for himself, could be placed among the prosperous few. Taking a censorious tone that echoes G. B. S.’s “Signet” letter, the essay challenges the industry to compare a prudent agent, who insures his own home against fire, with a recklessly socialist one, “who, at a stroke, insures all dwellings against fire; and who, without stopping to think about it, insures not only the lives of all those that live in the dwellings,” and so on, to the point where this fantasy of “insurance for all” becomes “the thing that fails to happen” (OP 234). Recounting this parable of a prodigal son (the overindulgent insurance agent), Stevens plays the roles of both didactic father and “good son,” advising that in order to protect against the death of the “father” (capital), one must first take measures to protect himself (the father’s “investment”).

Stevens compares the centralized insurance invented by Fascists and Communists to the Sci-Fi machines of H. G. Wells, but he overlooks the fantasy at the heart of his own project, that an insurance for the few must be built upon a capitalist metaphor of paternal plenitude and a belief in national prosperity that was especially hazardous in 1930s America. Each enterprise, insofar as it is founded on sign systems of ideology, is erected on the marshy grounds of fiction, a fundamental risk that no amount of insurance can cover. One crucial difference between the European models and the U.S. utopia presented by Stevens concerns the values that each enterprise assigns to the risks that it can and does cover. Stevens implies that an “insurance for all” would be preoccupied with disseminating “income” and therefore would carelessly succumb (as does G. B. S.) to the dissemination of economic risk—that risk that is remarkably high “in those European countries where social pressure has been most acute and social and political change most marked” (OP 236). Stevens implies that in these over politicized and crudely public systems the rather dainty interest in risk qua risk goes dreadfully unappreciated.

Not so in the United States. The capitalist model of “insurance for everything”—though decidedly not for everyone—strives for perfection by devoting itself not to the panoply of its insureds but to the very phenomenon of risk itself. In fact, perfect insurance fetishizes risk to the point of extreme impersonality, to the point where “There is no difference between the worm in the apple and the tack in the can of sardines, and not the slightest difference between the piano out of tune and a person disabled” (OP 234). Consequently, perfect insurance isolates each and every risk and studies its threat to the company’s wealth, regardless of the personal damage it poses for the claim-holder. The “real work” of perfect insurance (like the real work of capitalism, as I have demonstrated by a Gouxian
reading of the “Signet” letter) is a tireless game of hide-and-seek with the insistent hazards and tricky signs that make for its necessity.

But, again, not all risks are necessarily threats. Recall my speculation on the two different kinds Stevens inherited from G. B. S.—the “bad” risk that flouts all safety and wealth, merely opening the gates to ruin and loss, and the “good” risk that is wagered on making a profit. It is relevant that in his two insurance essays Stevens depicts two peculiar personae—the “letter carrier” and the “claim man”—two characters who play respective roles as the bad son and the good. Let us look at the bad son first.

Throughout “Insurance and Social Change,” Stevens displays conspicuous disdain for postal workers, “letter carriers” in particular. The greatest threat posed by centralized insurance, he seems to say, is typified by the fact that “in Italy postal officials are among those that sell [it]” and that in the Soviet Union “insurance agents [are] on a footing with letter carriers” (OP 235–36). In an obvious way he is thus appealing to his peers’ sense of class superiority, warning that only a capitalist economy would afford them the dignity they deserve. But, to analyze his more urgent caveat that in certain European economies “the finely-tailored agent, wearing a boutonniere, gives way to the letter carrier” (OP 236), we detect his fear that this fetishized figure of surplus and profit (so resembling Stevens, himself) can be sacrificed for one with nothing to gain. The letter carrier, after all, never collects, never retains, never accumulates: his single function is to facilitate circulation, to enact the inevitable dissemination of the sign.

In this way the letter carrier closely resembles Thoth, the sun-king Ra’s oldest son, who, in Derrida’s words, “occupies the role of messenger-god, of clever intermediary, ingenious and subtle enough to steal, and always to steal away. The signifier-god” (“Plato’s Pharmacy” 88). Distinguished by no more than his “Signet” ring, the letter carrier, like Thoth, aligns himself only with the vagary of the sign (and with other people’s letters). Surely, he represents the man that G. B. S. always feared his boy’s becoming, for, as he is by nature disenfranchised from profit, he refuses to honor or even acknowledge the good of the paternal metaphor. And for reasons Derrida goes on to give, he would also have been the bugbear of the good son, Wallace Stevens: “Always taking a place not his own, a place one could call that of the dead or the dummy, he has neither a proper place nor a proper name. His propriety or property is his impropriety or inappropriateness, the floating indetermination that allows for substitution and play” (“Plato’s Pharmacy” 93). Too “improper” to wear a “boutonniere,” neither “hammering” away nor doing “real work,” the Thoth-like letter carrier simply plays. Yet to the extent that he plays the role of an agent of risk for risk’s sake, “one who puts play into play” (“Plato’s Pharmacy” 93), the greatest danger he presents to the god-king-father of capitalism is the ease with which he could take the place of the “finely-tailed” son, the good son who keeps his vigil over both risk and capital.
Before looking more closely at this “bad” son, before taking into account who he may actually be, let us first account for the properties of the good son. The 1938 essay “Surety and Fidelity Claims” is a “human interest” piece in which Stevens describes the ever-diligent and loyal “claim man,” a perfect foil to the eavesdroppers “sorting postcards in a post office” (OP 237). All the same, we find he has a lot in common with the lowly letter carrier (whom Stevens finds it necessary to malign yet again in this essay): like the letter carrier, the claim man is also alienated from plenitude (“you never see a dollar”), yoked to the letter (“You sign a lot of drafts”), and always kept moving (“You try to do your traveling at night and often do it night after night” [OP 237]). In short, both the letter carrier and the claim man are lonely subalterns who set off into the benighted maze of signification, never sure what dangers may be lurking around the corner. But whereas the letter carrier, for Stevens, is a risk-taking trickster who is drawn into the shadows by mischievous curiosity, the claim man is a fearless minuteman, goaded along by his disdain for risk and his loyalty to the father’s wealth.

The claim man’s principal task is “paying claims” out of the company’s coffers, out of the father’s pocket, and because of this he is always “at the same time [investigating] the chance of getting the money back” (OP 239). This is what makes him the model son. For while each claim paid out further risks the father’s death, each claim reclaimed perpetuates the myth of paternal goodness and wealth. The good son is excited by this latter hope of certainty: it encourages him to work harder.

The work of the claim man involves an endless paper chase, a tireless jockeying with the capricious sign and attempting to shore up the endless flow of company wealth:

The major activity of a fidelity and surety claim department lies, of course, in paying claims. This involves much more than merely drawing drafts. It involves making sure that there has been a loss; that the company is liable for it; that you are discharging the liability by the payment, and that you are protecting whatever is available by way of salvage. There is nothing cut and dried about any of these things; you adapt yourself to each case. (OP 237–38)

The claim man is steadied in this risky task by his moral integrity. He is “constantly separating the good from the bad” (OP 237), the “bad” being those false claims for which, once they are caught, the company is ultimately not liable. Most bad claims predictably can be traced to the fickleness of the sign, either to the “ignorance” of the clients who misread their policies or, more nefariously, to “improper constructions placed on language used by the company” (OP 237). Hence, lest the company is to be betrayed by the same risky language that represents it (lest capitalism is
to be undone by the very money that secures its myth), the claim man must in good conscience attend to every ledger, receipt, record, bill, bank-roll, and check stub. Spurred on in his blood rivalry with the Thoth-like bad son—the “letter carrier” who would defer, lose, or steal a letter rather than have it reach its destination—the good son must scramble to save the sign from its inevitable dissemination. In his diligence he remains forever faithful that once a claim has been reclaimed, once “profit” has been restored in the form of a “signed draft,” then the real work has been accomplished and the father once more has been protected.

The large part of Stevens’ “human interest” essay catalogues the risky scenarios into which the claim man is thrown. He describes a gauntlet of bookkeepers, embezzlers, public officials, administrators, manufacturers, bank tellers, filling-station attendants, mothers, contractors’ wives, dead husbands, and so on, against all of whom the claim man must champion the father’s capital. Stevens insists that this recovery of “salvage” must be undertaken at high cost, at great risk, and so he concludes the earlier essay with an open call to sacrifice: “[privatized insurance] exacts of each of us all that each of us, in his own job, has to give” (OP 237). The greatest sacrifice is the complete reification of the claim man into a veritable paper-shuffling machine: “he finds it difficult sometimes to distinguish himself from the papers he handles and comes almost to believe that he and his papers constitute a single creature, consisting primarily of hands and eyes: lots of hands and lots of eyes.” It is small comfort that “this singular creature yields to more mature types,” by which Stevens means “a business alive and expanding,” a patrimony that yields only more of the same (OP 239).

But that was in 1938. Even while Europe was quaking at its foundation, inventing new and more tyrannical fathers eventually to be killed, the U.S. paternal metaphor managed to remain good and fixed. It seems that for Stevens the “surety” of the nation still relied on “fidelity” to that metaphor. Tradition told Stevens that “real work” and self-sacrifice would keep the truly valuable things intact. Not until the United States had joined World War II and Stevens had begun contemplating the real work of the soldier would he be forced to question the mortal risks that could be demanded by the father from beyond the grave. Although Stevens wrote poetry and made money in a “pressurized” climate of home-front prosperity, his personal confrontation with risk would “yield[] to more mature types,” if less sure ones, in the tumultuous realm of the imagination.

**THE BAD SON AND THE SOLDIER:**
*“He That of Repetition Is Most Master”*

On May 21, 1899, the same day G. B. S. composed his “Signet” letter, the young Stevens recorded in his journal a fanciful sketch about “Queen Mab and the faeries” who, marching in a “procession” bedecked in “all colors of paper and flags for a holiday” (L 25–26), begin weeping when they are
drenched by a summer shower. This is a decidedly low-stakes catastrophe. Just two days later, likely having read the “Signet” letter, he condemned the writing of such flighty reveries with this firm statement on “Poetry and Manhood”: “Those who say poetry is now the peculiar province of women say so because ideas about poetry are effeminate... Silly verse is always the work of silly men. Poetry itself is unchanged” (L 26; my emphasis). Finished fiddling around with silly verse—mutable and feminine verse—he resolves to hammer away at the real work of poetry, the manly verse of certainty.

Joseph Harrington, in an article that also takes a look at “Insurance and Social Change” as the outline to a “poetics of insurance,” so to speak, would seem to contradict this younger Stevens by emphasizing the role of “change” in older Stevens’ poetry. According to Harrington’s interpretation, “a liberal political economy must be maintained for Stevens’s poetic economy to remain healthy” (109); significantly, he also imagines a continuum between Stevens’s privatized insurance and what he calls his “privatizing poetic” (110), thus going the way of many who have criticized Stevens’ political reticence. He argues, moreover, in a rather sentimental tone, that this poetry-insurance “does not make our wishes come true, but it does make our losses good” (105). Yet in order to assert these claims Harrington limits his scope to Stevens’ public statements and overtly capitalistic poetry of the late 1930s, taking for his most solid example Stevens’ fascinatingly uncharacteristic poem “Owl’s Clover.”

I agree with Harrington that this latter poem does thematize “change” as a sociopolitical necessity. But I would add that while it supports, as Milton Bates has shown, “the Marxist insistence on change, revolution, and the future of man[,] but... denies that civilization must develop along predetermined, Hegelian lines” (176), at the same time it supports the notion that, according to Harrington’s interpretation, civilization should make its changes along the lines of “individual” profit: “If nationalized insurance [based on “ideology”] is a dead effigy, then private insurance grows organically because it depends upon individual imagination” (102). This libertarian variety of “organic change,” so depicted within this “poetics of insurance,” simply contributes to the production of an alternative, unchanging ideology; or, to put it in the terms I have been using thus far, this is the change of a company that is “alive and expanding,” thanks to the claim man and according to the paternal metaphor; it is a growth that preserves the status quo and cherishes above all the fixity of worth. A possible poetics of insurance, not unlike the young poet’s poetry of “Manhood,” would therefore be erected upon a dependable standard of value, functioning as a sort of life insurance policy against the risk of the father.

If Stevens did subscribe to such a poetics, he did not recognizably apply it to his most enduring poetry, wherein any standard of value is generally negotiable and where, much to the claim man’s dismay, the good cannot easily be divided from the bad.
The finest such example, in many ways, is to be found in Stevens’ pièce de résistance, “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction.” Here the myth of a sun-god-father, who is perenni ally good, abundant, and significant, is obliterated under the sublime trauma of war, leaving in its place a “supreme fiction.” Written in 1942 under what Stevens famously called “the pressure of reality,” the poem responds to a violent home front climate whose tremors, Stevens believed, caused “a pressure great enough to bring about the end of one era in the history of the imagination and [likewise] great enough to bring about the beginning of another” (NA 21). So does “Notes” announce a new era in the history of the imagination. At the poem’s opening, the persona speaks as if on the cusp of two such eras, addressing an “ephebe” who must “Begin . . . by perceiving the idea / Of this invention, this invented world, / The inconceivable idea of the sun” (CP 380). Since in the new era all notions of value are unstable inventions, one needs a radically revised mindset.

The ephebe is thus urged to “become an ignorant man again,” to look beyond an invented world that depends upon an imagined sun, beyond the current “project for the sun” that has personified it as an tyrannous father—“A voluminous master folded in his fire” (CP 380–81). While it is unclear what the ephebe is meant to be looking toward, it is clear that he is supposed to dismantle the projects that inscribe the sun with meaning and depend on this meaning for structure and stability. We must of course acknowledge that here, in contrast to his insurance essays, Stevens is writing in what Goux would call the register of “Logos” and not in its equivalent register of “Capital.” At a safe remove from questions of money, Stevens calls for an unveiling of the very sort of phallic mystery upon which Goux argues commodity fetishism is founded. Doffing the claim man’s “boutonniere” and “finely-tailored” suit, Stevens assumes the swagger of the ingrate Thoth (the parricidal son of the sun-god himself), boldly announcing, “Let Phoebus slumber and die in autumn umber, / Phoebus is dead, ephebe” (CP 381).

Stevens’ grand gesture of poetic parricide goes one step further than Goux’s necessary “exclusion” of the father “from the relative form [of value]” (23)—indeed, here Stevens “murders” the paternal metaphor that is created by such exclusion, such murder; the metaphor that predicates a centrist law of value: “The death of one god is the death of all” (CP 381). His sleight of hand, however, is to replace dead Phoebus with his own “project for the sun,” which he obliquely calls “the difficulty of what it is to be” (CP 381), putting in the place of the father the harbinger of a great, impending risk. What is more, the poet wholly embraces this risk. In canto III Stevens lays out the aesthetics of a poetry that can only catch glimpses of the “first idea,” poetry that “satisfies / Belief in an immaculate beginning” (CP 382) but promises no proof. Poetry offers a shifting and flickering truth that is flung about by the tides of fancy (“sends us, winged by an unconscious will”), is in constant flux between clarity and
dispersal ("From that ever-early candor to its late plural"), and is subject to the overwhelming thrills that can accompany pure thought ("the strong exhilaration / Of what we feel from what we think") (CP 382). As if in coy summary of canto III’s exegesis on the elusive truth poetry, the persona lingers on the “primitive astronomy” of “an Arabian in my room, / With his damned hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how,” notes how the “grossest iridescence of ocean / Howls hoo and rises and howls hoo and falls,” and poignantly concludes: “Life’s nonsense pierces us with strange relation” (CP 383). Poetry faithfully reflects “Life’s nonsense” and consequently “pierces” us with it.

The act of supplanting the mythic father with “difficulty,” and thus the “first idea” with “nonsense,” reveals a Wallace Stevens who might sympathize with Derrida’s following analysis of Plato: “This parricide, which opens up the play of difference and writing, is a frightening decision. . . . And one runs the risk of madness or of being considered mad in the well-behaved, sane, sensible society of grateful sons” (“Plato’s Pharmacy” 164). The writing of poetry delivers an exhilarating truth that puts the poet on a footing with the reckless letter carrier, and yet this is a risk Stevens is willing to take (at least within the register of Logos); clearly, he embraces the loss that in writing there is no profit, no sense, no preserving or even “separating” a dependable good. According to Stevens’ vision of poetry in a wartime climate, when the icons of value have all been shattered, there is no “real work” left to be done at all—no work but that which capitalizes on the unpredictability of the sign in a wager for the “elixir,” “excitation,” and “pure power” of poetic truth. Poetry is writing that gambles with the sign, either winning big with “an immaculate end” or going for broke with “nonsense” and “strange relation” (CP 382–83).

In 1942, Stevens spoke of poetry as “the violence from within that protects us from a violence without” (NA 36), and he located the force of it in the poet’s “power to abstract himself, and to withdraw with him into his abstraction the reality on which the lovers of truth insist. He must be able to abstract himself and also to abstract reality, which he does by placing it in his imagination” (NA 23). On the other hand, in the poem “Poetry Is a Destructive Force,” also published in 1942, he depicts poetry as a lion from within that devours the poet whole: “It can kill a man” (CP 193). Either way, in the lawless aftermath of the paternal metaphor, all that remains in the realm of the sign is high-stakes risk. Derrida only corroborates this point, writing, “the father’s death opens the reign of violence. In choosing violence . . . and violence against the father, the son—or patricidal writing—cannot fail to expose himself, too” (“Plato’s Pharmacy” 146). By announcing the father’s death, by aligning himself with the unstable sign whose violence he publicly underscores, Stevens flaunts the father’s murder and his own exposure to risk: He performs and he plays within this new realm of violence, well aware that his playing leaves him open to epistemological peril.
So different, then, from the “grateful sons” and claim men who protect
the father’s honor by arming themselves, wartime Stevens, in canto V
of “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” exposes the parricidal, ephebic poet
at his most inert and vulnerable, as he clutches a pillow, “press[ing] / A
bitter utterance from [his] writhing, . . . voluble dumb violence.” His home-
front imagination is tormented by visions of belligerent animals—of a “lion
[that] roars at the enraging desert” and “Reddens the sand with his re-
colored noise”; of an elephant that “Breaches the darkness of Ceylon with
blares” and “The glitter-goes on surfaces of tanks”; a “bear, / The ponder-
ous cinnamon” that “snarls in his mountain / At summer thunder.” Im-
potent, unable to salvage “the first idea” amidst terrifying images of war,
the poet is simply “cowed” (CP 384). The ephebe, impotent and muttering
in his garret, has only the lampooning and falsifying defenses of the po-
etic imagination:

These are the heroic children whom time breeds
Against the first idea—to lash the lion,
Caparison elephants, teach bears to juggle. (CP 385)

In cantos VIII through X, Stevens appears to be dismantling the myth
of an essential masculinity, giving it the redoubtable form of an “apotheo-
si[zed] . . . major man” that ultimately cannot hold his shape. Performing
the kind of gesture that would expose G. B. S. for what he is—a risky
father at play as the bounteous father—Stevens asserts, “It does not fol-
low that major man is man” (CP 387). It does not follow, that is, that the
certainties of the paternal metaphor have any truck with the risks of the
mortal father. Trying out candidates for the “major man,” Stevens starts
with an ideal poet named MacCullough, “Logos and logic, crystal hypoth-
esis,” a “pensive giant prone in violet space” who “lay lounging by the
sea . . . reading in the sound, / About the thinker of the first idea” and
who “might take habit,” might take his cues of thought and speech from
the perfect laws of nature (CP 387). MacCullough is the supreme fiction of
heroic humanity born of the lofty precepts of the Enlightenment, when, as
is concluded in canto X,

The major abstraction is the idea of man
And major man is its exponent, abler
In the abstract that in his singular,

More fecund as principle than particle. . . . (CP 388)

Discontent with this perfect abstraction and principle, Stevens defies
the “early candor” of the Enlightenment’s program for a single major man,
born of pure reason and schooled by nature. Disillusioned, he goes look-
ing for inspiration in the “late plural” of humanity’s rabble: siding him-
self with the “rabbi, grown furious with human wish” and with the solitary, weeping, and yet victorious “chieftain,” Stevens looks for his hero among “separate figures one by one” and settles on a tramp “in his old coat, / His slouching pantaloons, beyond the town.” Stevens supplants the fictive “major man” (the paternal metaphor) with the “singular” man who (like G. B. S, like Stevens himself) is no sure model of masculinity, but on the contrary is an impoverished figure of utter risk. The man of risk does not pretend to represent the sanctity of the first idea; he is the “final elegance” because, like the sign, he represents and resembles only his singular, scruffy self:

It is of him, ephebe, to make, to confect
The final elegance, not to console
Nor sanctify, but plainly to propound. (CP 389)

This bedraggled figure of the major man, called “Chaplinesque” (188) by Harold Bloom, belongs to no sanctified realm of ideas; he can be propounded plainly only in the ill-fitting clothes of language. And thus we find Stevens himself—always supplanting, always replacing, always deferring the truth of the “first idea”—nicely suited in the pantaloons of his own dread “letter carrier.”

“Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” must be read within its own “reign of violence”—within the reign of both the father’s death and, more urgently, World War II’s “pressure of reality.” Near the end of the poem, in canto IX of the third section, its wartime context (and agenda) comes more clearly into view. Turning peaceful pastoral into wartime allegory, turning singing birds into soldiers mourning the death of a comrade, the speaker gloomily urges a wren to “Whistle aloud” and a “Red robin,” a “forced bugler, / That bugles for the mate,” to “whistle and bugle and stop just short”—“Taps”-like—not to complete their “preludes” but to “practic[e] / Mere repetitions” (CP 405). Aestheticizing the soldier’s death, though much less candidly here than in “Esthétique du Mal,” where he ponders “How red the rose that is the soldier’s wound” (CP 318), Stevens uses his poetic license to obscure the mortal risk of the soldier, who after all is a claim man of heroic proportions, a reified worker who must take risks, though supreme risks, in defense of the father’s security. What is Stevens up to here? In obscuring the soldier and his mortal risk, is Stevens himself cowering in his garret from the terrifying images of war? Does this defiantly risky and désabusé modernist poem take a sudden turn toward the safe and conservative, or even worse, toward the low-stakes catastrophes of “Queen Mab and the faeries”? Reading on, we discover that his subtle allegory of singing birds and mourning soldiers yields, in the end, more “mature” results and a surprising conclusion. In verses that soften our lingering images of the claim man, whose job of salvaging the
father’s money will never be done, the speaker goes on to describe the bugler’s grim repetitions as being merely

An occupation, an exercise, a work,

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

And round and round, the merely going round,
Until merely going round is a final good. . . . (CP 405)

These six pleasantly circulating verses put the letter carrier, the claim man, the soldier, and the poet all on the same footing, all of them working for the same “final good.” Whistling the lonely letter carrier’s song, the circulation song, the mourner’s song, mocking the “real work” that depends on a fixed value as its final good, mocking the “real work” that is compensated by a dependable return, Stevens outgrows both G. B. S. and the paternal metaphor by quietly substituting “work” with play, the good of “merely going round.”

Stevens’ valorization of “repetition” in this passage takes on different meanings when read on different registers. On the numismatic register, the substitution of profitable work for repetitive play exposes only the emptiness of a sign that has been valued according to a myth of the father, revealing that its real work, its final good, can be neither more nor less than its “merely going round.” With no transcendent value to which it can “return,” the circulating dollar is in this way put “on a footing” with the everyday postcard. On the register of Logos, it validates the free play of a sign that G. B. S. once ridiculed and devalued for its very repetitiveness; as “work,” that is, the writer’s repetition of the sign becomes a good in and of itself, a final good that forever replaces the sun, the Father of Logos. “The true,” Derrida reiterates, “is repeated; it is what is repeated in the repetition, what is represented and present in the representation. . . . The true is the presence of the eidos signified” (“Plato’s Pharmacy” 111). The father dead, there is no truth to get back to, only risky imitations of the first idea, and so it is that, in the poem’s final stanzas, the persona anticipates a day when “They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne,” and he will be “Pleased” to learn “that the irrational is rational” (CP 406), that truth may be found in risk itself. The final good of poetry and its repetitions, Stevens asserts in this penultimate canto of “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” is not its promise of truth (nay, its nonsense pierces with strange relation) but the elusive pleasure that it affords—the pleasure of merely circulating, the satisfaction of work for work’s sake, a good in itself—though poignantly ineffectual in a time of war when poetry is called upon to give the comfort of certainty.
So what is Stevens saying about the soldier’s work? Is the poem suggesting that the soldier too is merely playing? That the soldier practices mere repetitions in service of a long-dead father—his only dependable “return” being the one that comes home in a body bag?

The poem’s coda unflinchingly begins:

Soldier, there is a war between the mind
And sky, between thought and day and night. It is
For that the poet is always in the sun,

Patches the moon together in his room
To his Virgilian cadences, up down,
Up down. It is a war that never ends. (CP 406)

Stevens ennobles his hard work as poet—presumably the drudgery of writing an impeccably structured, blank-verse, 659-line masterpiece—and compares it, however riskily, with the “up down, up down” repetitions of the soldier. The poet’s tireless struggle with the slippery truth and the sliding sign, particularly in a time of war, is an attempt to do the boldly “real” and “heroic” work of the soldier. This amusingly macho gesture must mean that the work of writing risky poetry (as opposed to writing poetry that leans on a fictive “first idea”) is in itself satisfactorily the “Poetry of Manhood.” One may look for a trace of resentment in these verses, maybe rebellion against a father who made his son put stock in supreme fictions, maybe protest against a government that makes soldiers die for fictions, but if resentment is there, it is well concealed. The poet, no longer an ephebe, sees only the job at hand, “a war between the mind / And sky.” Focusing on their endless and risky tasks, the poet and the soldier must find the greatest meaning in the bald fact of what they are made to do, as

Perhaps,
The man-hero is not the exceptional monster,
But he that of repetition is most master. (CP 406)

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Notes

1 Goux makes it clear that a real person such as G. B. S. is constitutionally incapable of performing this role:

“Identification with the paternal totem” . . . is made possible only by the death of the real father, who then takes up the position of the dead father, first fetishized and subsequently symbolized and idealized. In the same way,
the commodity recognized as universal equivalent becomes, in its monoply, more than just another commodity; this commodity . . . becomes money. . . . (18)

So it is that G. B. S. actually plays the role of the dead father.

2 Here I am concerned with the signature in that it attempts to establish or perform a “presence” that in this case heralds the father’s death on the horizon. It might just as well be viewed in terms of Derrida’s essay “Signature, Event, Context,” wherein the signature that authorizes, for instance, a letter or check by “securing” it in a “source” or “pure event” must ultimately fail, for the value of a signature will always be its idiosyncratic repetition (328); significantly, another risk of the signature “G. W. S.” is that, to be authentic, it needs to be a perfect counterfeit.

3 I am alluding to “Le Facteur de la Vérité,” a later chapter in The Post Card, wherein Derrida argues that the “letter carrier of truth” who delivers Lacan’s notion that a letter must always reach its destination is itself a fiction—Poe’s “Purloined Letter.” By resisting the syntactic and semantic risk of this fiction, Lacan, acting not unlike the claim man himself, attempts “To return the letter to its proper course, . . . to correct a deviation, to rectify a departure, to recall, for the sake of the rule [of psychoanalysis], i.e., the norm, an orientation, an authentic line.” So, in response to Lacan’s conclusion that a letter must always reach its destination, Derrida, in the manner of Thoth, repeats but inverts this “truth”: “a letter can always not arrive at its destination” (443–44).

4 Just like the letter carrier, the Stevens of “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” masters Thoth’s trickery with the supplement: “He is . . . the father’s other, the father, and the subversive movement of replacement. The god of writing is thus at once his father, his son, and himself” (“Plato’s Pharmacy” 93). But is it any surprise to the reader that Stevens the poet should play the bad son to Logos? Even to analyze the ironic dialectic that forms the organization of “Notes” (“It Must Be Abstract,” “It Must Change,” “It Must Give Pleasure”), we see a sleight-of-hand worthy of the trickster Thoth, who, in Derrida’s opinion, “would be the mediating movement of dialectics if he did not also mimic it, indefinitely preventing it, through this ironic doubling, from reaching some final fulfillment or eschatological reappropriation” (“Plato’s Pharmacy” 93). By positing “Pleasure” as the synthesis of “Abstraction” and “Change,” Stevens mocks the “mediating movement” of the syllogism, the cornerstone of Western philosophy; he prevents this otherwise recognizable dialectic from reaching a “final fulfillment” or an “eschatological reappropriation” by robbing it of the power of a “therefore” and replacing its conclusion with the sheer play of repetition—a third premise. What is more, so far as Stevens’ “ ironic doublings” are concerned, Eleanor Cook has exhaustively shown the immense dissemination of wordplay throughout this poem and all of his works. If a single trait were to expose Stevens as the refractory son of Logos, it would have to be his insatiable desire to play.

5 James Longenbach offers a compelling reading of “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” as a poem about “the role of the writer in a time of war” (250), arguing that the difficult “abstraction” promoted and characterized by this poem puts it in the category of “modernist extravagance [that] regained its authority” during wartime, if only because art such as James Joyce’s and Pablo Picasso’s “began to seem less elitist than generous—a common language rather than a private one, an internationalist art rather than an art of nationalist or regionalist allegiance” (253). I would add that Stevens’ rather eccentric abstraction, in this passage, of work and play into the pleasant “merely going round” of repetition achieves a similar generosity and inclusiveness. Just as Stevens’ “Noble Rider” essay empathically associates the allies’ experience of violence with that of the “enemies,” so too does this poem scour both the poet and the soldier of allegiance and significance by subordinating them to their most basic common functions: work, repetition.
Works Cited


She and/or Sea in
“The Idea of Order at Key West”

WALLACE MARTIN

IN A RECENT ISSUE OF The Wallace Stevens Journal, Brooke Baeten explains how, in “The Idea of Order at Key West,” Wallace Stevens “appropriates [the woman’s] ‘voice.’ . . . The supposedly autonomous female ‘maker’ is cast aside, or rather, her projected image is repossessed and again internalized” (32). Relying in part on Jacques Lacan’s account of the mirror stage, Baeten provides new evidence that, as Jacqueline Vaught Brogan asserts, the “feminine voice . . . is simultaneously created, disclosed in the portals, and repressed—silenced” (14). In these comments and those of other interpreters, it is not clear whether there actually is a woman present, or simply a muse, a feminine voice, or (in Baeten’s reading) the poet’s mirror image. In these circumstances, it is useful to consider the ways in which literary conventions (personification, genre, metaphor, rhetoric) and psychological processes (identification, projection, repression, introjection) disrupt the relation of poetry to reality. Identification of the conventions and psychic compulsions in the poem might reveal the real identity of the enigmatic female figure—and thus disclose the meaning of the poem.

Perhaps the woman is a muse. She is, as Baeten says, “obviously romanticized as a being similar to the classical Muse” (33)—a figure that, in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” Stevens evoked and then “dismisses . . . as merely a trope” (NA 33, 29). His ambivalence about the muses is evident in his correspondence. About a year after the publication of “The Idea of Order at Key West,” in a letter to Ronald Latimer, he writes: “The music of poetry which creates its own fictions is one of the ‘sisterhood of the living dead.’ It is a muse: all of the muses are of that sisterhood.” On the following day, again to Latimer, he writes: “No muses exist for me. . . . I felt as though I should have to say this to you in order to enjoy Thanksgiving properly” (L 297–98). For an understanding of this ambivalence, we can pursue Baeten’s suggestion that the muse-figure in Stevens’ poem has been “romanticized.”

It is to the credit of classical Greece that its poets never repressed or silenced the muses. Instead, they claimed to be repeating exactly what the muses conveyed to them. The reason for this fidelity was that the poet
claimed to tell “the truth about heroic actions without having to be an eyewitness. Instead, the truth is his simply by virtue of his hearing from the Muses what they saw” (Nagy 26). Such literary usefulness as the muses possessed did not survive the Enlightenment, despite Thomas Gray’s attempt to rehabilitate them, as Ernst Curtius shows in his useful history of their post-classical fate (228–46). As a substitute, topographical poets of the eighteenth century invoked the genius loci, the spirit of a place. By the romantic period, even the genius loci had become implausible. Wordsworth provides an example: in the manuscript of his poem “Nutting” (553), as Arthur Beatty observes, “the ‘guardian Spirits’ of 1798–99 become ‘a spirit in the woods’ in 1800” (Wordsworth: Representative Poems 313).

The romantic successor to this spirit founded the topos, or literary sub-genre, that is exemplified in “The Idea of Order at Key West”: a woman sings a beautiful song that is unintelligible to the poet, who then writes a poem about the experience. In Wordsworth, she is “The Solitary Reaper,” a “Highland Lass” who sings a song that the enchanted poet does not record. In “Kubla Khan,” the song of “an Abyssinian maid” would have enabled Coleridge to rebuild, imaginatively, the pleasure dome of which he dreamed—“Could I revive within me, / Her symphony and song” (669).

In these poems, as Baeten observes in connection with Stevens, “the supposedly autonomous female ‘maker’ is cast aside, or rather, her projected image is repossessed and again internalized as the male poet exercises his own voice” (32). To acknowledge that the female maker is treated thus is to raise a larger issue concerning the (en)gendering of poetry in the romantic tradition. Wordsworth and Coleridge evoked what the psycho-analyst might consider defenses in appropriating the feminine voice: the highland lass was singing in Gaelic and Coleridge’s maid in Abyssinian—languages they did not know—precluding transcription of the songs. We must remember, however, that the perfection of the songs these women sing is neither appropriated nor approximated in any masculine mastery of worldmaking: all three poems testify to the romantic failure to replicate such wholeness. What Baeten rightly sees as “a certain feeling of inadequacy” (33) is characteristic of this tradition.

Finding a pigeonhole for the genre of the poem does not establish the identity of the woman. She may be a descendent of the muses, but is she as real as Wordsworth’s highland lass or an imaginary figure like Coleridge’s Abyssinian maid? Baeten poses the crucial question at the beginning of her article: “There is a woman at Key West, a woman who sings, a woman who makes a world. Or is there?” (24). Baeten mentions alternative answers that have been proposed: David La Guardia and Janet McCann say that the woman is “a personification of the imagination” (24); Baeten says she is “a composite figure representing several poetic conventions” (24). On the other hand, she “functions [not is, but functions] not only as the imagination personified, but also as the poet” (25). We can also construe “‘the woman as poet and the sea as reality, the narrator as witness’”
(La Guardia, qtd. in Baeten 27); but psychologically, we can see the woman as “the projection of the male speaker’s poetic identity” (31).

Other critics expand the range of possibilities. The “she” is a “girl,” according to Vendler (68) and Bloom (94). (Hence she might be construed as “The Girl Who Succeeds the Muses” in Hegel, as discussed by Jean-Luc Nancy.) J. Hillis Miller, on the other hand, proposes that the antecedent of the pronoun “she” in the first line may be the title of the poem: “Could ‘she’ not be an embodiment or prosopopoeia of ‘The Idea of Order at Key West?’” (200). In Thomas Bertonneau’s reading, she has no integral existence because she manifests herself only as “various metonyms,” having been “spargamically dispersed, like the scapegoat” (56).

Critics find the autonomy of the singer as a physical presence threatened by three potential assimilations. She can be construed as a personification (of the genius loci, a “spirit,” the muse, Stevens’ voice, or an idea); her song may be inseparable from the ocean’s sounds; or her voice, “the dark voice of the sea,” and “the outer voice of sky” may all be subsumed by something that was “more than that” (CP 129). Eleanor Cook is refreshingly categorical in rejecting these possibilities: “Stevens’ woman sings her own song, and she is treated as a fellow craftsman. . . . [H]is sea does not have a knowable spirit” (131). What is at stake, in the identification of persons, voices, and spirits on the referential level, is the mapping of these entities in a thematic constellation. What exists in the poem depends on what it means—and vice versa. We are trapped in the hermeneutic circle. If the references blur into each other, we end up with Harold Bloom’s “High Romantic poem” (96). For John Hollander, the distinctions that the poem makes between “human music” and “the spontaneous noises of nature” are sufficient to certify its distance from the romantic topos (236–37). So long as the sounds of humanity and nature remain distinct, we will encounter an “anti-Romantic” poem (Cook 132), and the same will be true if we see the poem as a deconstruction of the tropes that make an “inspirational muse . . . part and parcel of the masculine ‘rage for order’” (Cleghorn 35).

Interpreters who doubt that Stevens has kept these entities distinct or who think he has not himself decided how they are related find the poem ambivalent. Identifying the song and the sea with “the two Wordsworthian orders of mind and world,” Helen Vendler sees them as “exquisitely fitted and yet subtly uneasy with each other.” She concludes “Stevens’ powers of representation are being strained . . . in asserting the power of poetry over nature”; there is an “endangering sentimentality” when the singer becomes “entirely the maker of the world she sings” (68–71). A “marriage of subject and object” in a “higher synthesis of the two” is, as Joseph Riddel says, “a ‘sentimental form’” (119). All of these interpretations seem possible. We may conclude, with Bloom, that “the poem . . . remains equivocal and perhaps impossible to interpret fully” (104).
The metaphors that transport us from scene to theme are equivocal because of the nearly equal vocalic claims of her song and the sea’s. At some points they seem to merge; elsewhere, they are clearly differentiated; toward the end, as Vendler notes, the sound is “more even than her voice, and ours” (68). These points of figuration, exemplifying what de Man calls the “rhetoric of tropes,” are stitched together (in his terminology) by the “rhetoric of persuasion” (119–31). Paul de Man claims that these two dimensions of literature—metaphoric fusion and metonymic/syntactic displacement—continually disrupt each other. Cook shows that this is especially true in Stevens’ poetry. As she notes, Vendler’s remark that “his syntax serves to delay and disarticulate” points to the same feature of his work (4).

Classical rhetoric provides many terms that can be applied to the argumentative methods of Stevens’ poem: apophasis (giving and confuting many reasons); argumentum ex concessis (reasoning from an opponent’s premises); metanoia (qualifying a statement); paralogia (conceding a point); procatalepsis (anticipating an objection to forestall it). As deployed by Stevens, these produce what can be called a “rhetoric of denial.” This mode of argument violates a cardinal rule taught in colleges of law: never answer an objection that the opposing lawyer does not make. In literature, the danger of overinsistence is commemorated in the Queen’s comment about the play performed in Hamlet: “The lady doth protest too much methinks” (III.ii.242). To explain this view, I must take on the role of a prosecutor (hoping that lovers of the poem will forgive me) who suspects that the poet is uncertain about the identity of the woman and what he hears.

The first line of the poem identifies three entities: she, the genius of the sea, and the sea itself. The second stanza denies an objection that no one has made: “The song and water were not medleyed sound”—who would have supposed that they were?—“Even if what she sang was what she heard.” Perhaps, then, what she sang was what she heard? We are offered another concession to an objection we have not made: “It may be that in all her phrases stirred . . .” May be? What made that possible? The question “Whose spirit is this?” that they asked “often as she sang” at first seems simply bizarre: whose spirit could it have been, other than hers or that of the “genius”? “If it was only the dark voice of the sea” Stevens says (CP 128–29). Is the poet suggesting that it might have been only that (a possibility that I had not imagined)?

Having demonstrated to his own satisfaction the categorical difference between song and sea, the narrator denies that the two were different: the sea, “Whatever self it had, became the self / That was her song” (CP 129). The rhetoric of denial then reaches its height: “there never was a world for her / Except the one she sang and, singing, made” (CP 130). This implies that she did not exist either before or after singing. After we have granted the narrator his distinctions between she, genius, and sea, and accepted
all of his arguments concerning their differences, we find him telling us that there were no differences. Angus Cleghorn states the case succinctly: "the two entities [she and sea] are called up simultaneously in the poem and are therefore set in comparative relation so that the negatives fail to deny metaphorical identity... The logic of negation is overpowered by the suggestive capabilities of figures"—a result, in part, of "Stevens' rampant use of the conditional" (25–26). Rather than resolving questions about the woman's identity, consideration of the poem's genre and its rhetoric leave us empty-handed.

It is a truth almost universally acknowledged that a poem rich in ambiguity and ambivalence must be in want of a biographer or a psychoanalyst. Faced with the difficulty of pinning down the singer, song, and sound of the sea on the referential level, one can construe them as internalizations, identifications, and projections that reveal the psyche of the poet. For Baeten, the singer is also "the poet himself"; thus she can be construed as his projection of the feminine. (Jungians would refer to her as his anima.) Baeten concludes that Stevens, having discarded the muse, "emphasizes the virility and the ultimate authority of the masculine voice of the poet" (29). She thinks that the woman in the poem is Stevens' mirror image, and she identifies this image with the one involved in Lacan's "mirror stage" of infantile development.

While resisting Baeten's interpretation, I cannot deny the persuasiveness of her assumption that an internalized reading of Stevens' poem may reveal meanings that escape those who attend only to its manifest themes. Lyric poetry thrives on the exchanges of inner and outer that captivate the reader when words hover in the zone between the conscious and the unconscious. The willingness of poets and their interpreters to relax everyday distinctions among people, muses, and fantasy is never objectionable; on the contrary, it is characteristic of the genre. Through a kind of mimetic contagion, readers often accept and replicate the ambivalence enacted by the poet. This leads interpreters to seek solid ground for interpretation in psychology and psychoanalysis.

Baeten's references to Lacan's "mirror stage" provide a relevant opening of the topic. In view of her conclusion that, according to Lacan, a woman "is both ideologically and literally excluded from 'speaking' " (28), I find it surprising that she accepts his theory of the mirror stage as a useful psychoanalytic model.¹ She is undoubtedly aware that there is no single "Lacanian reader" (35), given the differences that separate both the groups devoted to the study of his work and individual analysts. About the general features of the mirror stage, however, there is little disagreement, and Baeten's account of it prompts me to add a few comments about its relation to later developmental stages.²

The mirror stage, which as Baeten says introduces a mirage of subjective unity in the infant's fragmentary world, constitutes the Imaginary register, in which the infant oscillates between identification with, and
independence of, the (m)other. Jacqueline Rose, in one of Baeten’s primary sources, explains this process. As Rose points out, the mirror stage requires the presence not just of infant and image, but of a third figure, who, as guarantor of otherness, enables the accession of identity by preventing it from vanishing in totality: “that moment only has meaning in relation to the presence and look of the mother who guarantees its reality for the child” (30). Baeten says that as a result of the mirror stage, “the subject can proceed to examine his relationship to others and to the world” (31). According to Lacan, the mirror stage does not create a “subject.” It is a stage of aggression, delusions of omnipotence, and paranoia. If not anchored in the Symbolic, the mirror stage results in psychosis.

In the mirror stage, subjectivity is not yet gendered. With the acquisition of language and restriction of imaginary identifications, the infant gains an identity in the Symbolic register that stabilizes its independence—and ensures its alienation. This development corresponds to Freud’s Oedipal stage and entails loss of the phallus. The yearning for a lost part of the self through which unity and phallic self-assurance might be recovered results from the Symbolic stage, in which, e.g., the gaze or the voice (perhaps a muse) is the object of desire. There is thus a constitutive basis for Stevens’ “feeling of inadequacy” (Baeten 33).

If, when reading Stevens’ poem, we accept metamorphic identifications of the woman as the imagination, the poet, a muse, and an actually present person—a lost object that takes many forms—we ourselves are captivated in the Imaginary. This is I think a normal psychological state when we are engaged in “rapt reading,” fully steeped in the text. Emergence from this state requires that the poet lead us from ontogeny to a new phylogeny of the Symbolic. For Lacan, poetry cannot be created until mirror-stage identifications have been overcome: “There is poetry whenever writing introduces us to a world other than our own and also makes it become our own. . . . Poetry is the creation of a subject adopting a new order of symbolic relations to the world” (78). The “maker’s rage to order words of the sea” (CP 130) at the end of the poem represents the narrator as one who yearns to create such an order. These considerations preclude my acceptance of Baeten’s account of Lacan’s mirror stage in relation to Stevens.

The order created by a poet consists of words. No American poet is more conscious of the ways in which meaning emerges from sound than is Stevens—as we know from the writings of Marie Borroff, Cook, Beverly Maeder, Anca Rosu, and Hollander. As Hollander says, “Stevens’ poetry is suffused with systematic sound” (235). The voice that enchants the narrator in “The Idea of Order at Key West,” issuing from a shifting female figure who utters words he cannot repeat, might well lead a critic back to “the language that comes from the mother” and maternal desire (Ragland 192). Psychoanalytic conjecture is relevant to a poem that presents us with a sonorous constellation of self, world, and meaning. The psychoanalyst and critic Julia Kristeva traces the origin of poetry to an earlier stage of
infantile development, before sound has taken on meaning. A brief account of her theory, as presented in her book *Revolution in Poetic Language*, is relevant to the linguistic play one finds in Stevens. Implicitly opposing Lacan’s conception of poetry as an “order of symbolic relations,” Kristeva emphasizes the importance of the prenatal stage in the emergence of poetry. The infant lives in a matrix of instincts, sensations, rhythms, “marks,” and impulses that she calls the “chora”—a maternal matrix prior to distinctions between self, world, and (m)other. After birth, once the buzz, hum, and pulsation of sound begin to issue in phonemes, the world takes on a structure with meaning. (Roman Jakobson wrote an interesting article on the emergence of phonemes and meaning: “Why ‘Mama’ and ‘Papa’?”) The infant then moves from the “semiotic” to the “symbolic,” in Kristeva’s terminology. Poetry, in her view, is not generically constituted as a new symbolic order that stands alongside or above the symbolic structures of culture. It springs from a regression to the semiotic in which constative or propositional language is no longer in control. It differs, however, from fetishism and psychosis because it retains *some* meaning:

No text, no matter how “musicalized,” is devoid of meaning or signification; on the contrary, musicalization pluralizes meanings. . . . The text signifies the un-signifying; it assumes [relève] within a signifying practice this functioning (the semiotic), which ignores meaning and operates before meaning or despite it. . . . The text offers itself as the dialectic of two heterogeneous operations [the semiotic and the symbolic] that are, reciprocally and inseparably, preconditions for each other. (65–66)

There is obviously something “childish” about sound-games and word-play—sources of delight in a child’s language-learning, and perhaps a path of regression for a poet tapping unconscious sources. In Stevens’ games with language, poems may become riddles or charms, as Cook shows. At times, his hyperconscious linguistic play may be almost unintelligible. But such play may produce sonorities in which the poet finds meanings. That is the case I think with a poem that can, by coercion, be made a companion piece to “The Idea of Order at Key West”—“The Search for Sound Free from Motion.” In the latter, the singer is a gramophone; the wind is “the weather”; and the sea is (again) the sea:

All afternoon the gramophone
Parl-parled the West-Indian weather.
The zebra leaves, the sea
And it all spoke together. (CP 268)

In the third stanza, the singer becomes “the gramaphoon.” The machine has been invaded by “afternoon” and “typhoon”—the Eastern counterpart
of that stanza’s “West-Indian hurricane.” Phonograph is etymologically “sound-writing”; Stevens’ gramophone (which he changes to “grama-”) is “letter-sound.”

When sea, storm, and gramophone speak together, they produce “The world as word.” In the last stanza, the world “Speaks as you speak, a creature that / Repeats its vital words, yet balances / The syllable of a syllable” (CP 268). A syllable (syn, with, plus lambanein, to take) is, in a dictionary definition, “that which is held together, several letters taken together so as to form a sound.” The definition parses “all spoke together” in the first stanza, later rephrased as “spoke all together.” The last line, declaring that the world “balances / The syllable of a syllable,” shunts aside the equipoise that previous lines seemed to proffer. If the world “Speaks as you speak,” why not balance these two sonorities? Another possibility would be to balance world as referent with “world” as word. Yet the weight or value on one side of the balance is imponderable if we do not know what “The syllable of a syllable” is. Does the possessive genitive suggest that “word” is a syllable within “world”?

On the other hand, a syllable may lack meaning; it need not be a seme or morpheme. We can, following the path of Plato’s Cratylus, seek sense in a meaningless syllable. “Prologues to What Is Possible” speaks of “a syllable without any meaning, / A syllable of which he felt . . . / That it contained the meaning into which he wanted to enter” (CP 516). Unable to interpret the last line of “The Search for Sound Free from Motion,” I am grateful for Garrett Stewart’s suggestions about two previous lines: “But you, you used the word / Your self its honor.” He finds the source of these lines the phrases “honoring one’s word” and “my word is my honor.” But the shift that occurs when the juncture (pause between phonemes) approaches zero leads us (as Stewart says) to hear “your self its sonore”—your self its loud-sounding. “Parl-parled” (CP 268) has prepared us for the French punning.

My attempt to identify the woman in “The Idea of Order at Key West,” looking for her on the beach, in interpretations of the poem, in Stevens’ imagination, in his infantile development, and in the history of poetry and genre, has been a failure. To state the result as categorically as possible: there is no reliable evidence that she is a muse, a girl, or a woman. She exists only as pronouns. She is, essentially, the sound of the word “she”—and if she is more than that, the “more” consists of sounds related to her own.

Attempts to identify the referents (the facts) in Stevens’ poems lead to thematic questions; attempts to answer those questions may trigger explorations of his psyche and the unconscious. From those heights and depths, my fascination returns to the surface of the poems—their letters, sounds, and words. (This aspect of Stevens’ poetry is highlighted by Aaron McCullough’s article in this issue of The Wallace Stevens Journal.) Shades of difference separate sounds that have no rational relation to their graphic
representation in English, or to the meanings that they arbitrarily repre-
sent (cf. Stevens’ “world as word”). The desire to fuse, or “motivate,” the
connections between sound, sign, and meaning—which Stevens shared
with Joyce—leads us to the unconscious and to interpretations that would
fix the flux in place. But we need not turn to psychoanalysis or theory to
confirm this conclusion. The best evidence we have is not hidden, but
evident to the eye and ear—as in Poe’s story “The Purloined Letter.” Rad-
cal simplification of the ambiguities in “The Idea of Order at Key West”
would reduce them to a single line in the poem: “But it was she and not
the sea we heard” (CP 128). The difference is apparent: when we hear “she,”
we hear something slightly different from “sea.” Nevertheless, for one
who seeks the fusion of meaning and being, this confusing similarity-in-
difference is elusive, yet crucial.

The desire to fuse natural sound with human meaning is evident in the
are you seeking, / Vocalissimus, / In the distances of sleep? / Speak it”
(CP 113). As Srikanth Reddy remarks, this poem suggests that “the elu-
sive Ur-syllable has yet to be spoken” (11). We might call this aspect of
Stevens’ practice his Cratylic dream—that of a fixed relation between pho-
neme and seme. At times, this dream is comic: “Could Crispin stem ver-
boseness in the sea . . .?” (CP 28). No—because it was never silent, and “c”
can be incredibly verbose, as “The Comedian as the Letter C” testifies.

Having begun with “The Idea of Order at Key West,” I follow the path
that Hollander traced in “The Sound of Music and the Music of Sound,”
ending with reference to the poem that he discusses in concluding his
essay. The comedy and seriousness of the search for the Ur-syllable end in
the last of the Collected Poems: “Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing
Itself.” The cry of the bird at dawn is “A chorister whose c preceded the
choir” (CP 534). The phoneme is at last fused with song. From c, see, sea,
and s/he arise the differences to be reconciled in the unconscious, the imagi-
nation, and poetry.

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Notes

1 For a more detailed account of Lacan’s writings on the phallus that lends some
support to Baeten’s view, see Borch-Jacobsen (205–28). Baeten is, however, incorrect in
saying that a woman is “ideologically excluded from possessing the phallus” (27).
Lacan’s formulas of sexual differentiation (Rose 149) are explained by Copjec (201–36).

2 In view of the differences in interpretations of Lacan, I feel obliged to admit that
Ellie Ragland, Slavoj Zizek, and Joan Copjec have constituted my understanding of
sexual difference as conceived by Lacan. Conferences and summer institutes on Lacan
held at Kent State University—in particular, sessions taught by Savas Patsalides, Diane
Rabinovich, Charles Shepherdson, Willy Apollon, and Marie-Hélène Brousse—pro-
vided such explanations of his work as I have been able to absorb.
My reservations about Baeten’s account result from the difficulty I have in relating Lacan’s mirror stage to the woman in the poem as Stevens’ “mirror image” (31–32). Connection of this image with the infantile mirror stage could result only from regression, a screen memory, or “acting out” (Agieren) of the original scene. Baeten construes the female figure as a product of projection and repression. In Freud and Lacan, these concepts refer to psychic contents that threaten or terrify the subject, whereas the figure in the poem appears instead to entail the opposite mechanisms: identification and introjection. Further, the image of the mirror stage must be perceived as totally identical to the infant itself (not another person or psychic faculty) for the event to occur. However, other psychoanalytic traditions, especially the Jungian one (cf. Hillman 85), do provide structures that support Baeten’s discussion of the woman as mirror image.

Susan Kolodny defines “regression” as “that fluid, usually transient movement backwards in psychological development, in ways of thinking or perceiving, in the pleasures we seek or the fears we experience, and in how we defend ourselves. To give in to regression in the ways that creative work requires is to temporarily relinquish conscious, rational control over the workings of the mind” (xv). Stevens’ first reference to a muse occurs at the end of a fanciful, euphuistic letter to his mother: “I have exhausted my present resources and must retreat to the horizon of indigence and conjure again an indifferent Muse” (L 10).

Works Cited


WITH THE NECESSARY ANGEL, Wallace Stevens explicitly examined his own poetic intentions vis-à-vis a synthesis of the philosophies of Plato, William James, George Santayana, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. In doing so, Stevens generously contributed to the scholarship of his own work. In fact, the dominant trend in reading Stevens has, for the latter half of the last century, been determined to reconcile what Stevens thought he was up to with what his poems actually do. Consider David M. La Guardia’s often cited Advance on Chaos: The Sanctifying Imagination of Wallace Stevens, wherein the author claims “a reader’s task consists of an attempt to interpolate an artist’s intention within the context of linguistic norms, fluid as they may be, shared by reader and author both. . . . My intent . . . is to delineate what Stevens meant to say in his poetry, not what the poems mean as ‘texts’ distinct from their author” (xii). Without inviting the blindness obliged by a purely New Critical reading style, I would aver that a general tendency to take Stevens at his word has itself blinded many a reader to revolutionary features of Stevens’ actual poems.

Stevens’ “The Idea of Order at Key West” (CP 128–30), for example, derives much of its intensity from stylistic, formal, and argumentative differences and repetitions that often seem just beyond the poet’s control. Sheer contortionism: Stevens’ poetic extremities crank in divergent directions to show more than three dimensions, to show rather an almost confounding array of dimensions at once in a word. Always, though, plurality in Stevens’ poem is matched by a tightening in the conceptual yoke (the normalizing god in him, freezing trajectories, forcing accord, simultaneously generating further explosive, disjunctive energies). Inevitably, Stevens’ poem says more than he meant it to say. This disjunction between intention and meaning keeps “The Idea of Order at Key West” vital. It is this disjunction that makes the poem, in Ezra Pound’s famous formulation, “news that stays news” (29).

The collisions and fusions in “The Idea of Order at Key West” of temporal concerns with spatial concerns, complicated by the ensuing ruptures of the poem’s every totalizing scheme, require a new analytical vocabulary.
Much of the terminology coined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s self-styled schizoanalysis provides just such a new and useful vocabulary for discussing Stevens’ poetics. I am most interested in exploring the way Deleuze-Guattari’s interest in the productive and paralyzing extremes of desire yields new access to Stevens’ poem. Beginning with a schizoanalytic reading of some of the formal features in “The Idea of Order at Key West” and then moving on to the often clashing logics of its imagery and argument, I want to examine the schizo-like “breakdown[s] . . . [and] breakthrough[s]” (Deleuze-Guattari 131) Stevens’ poem goes through in its attempt to harmonize an awareness of multiplicity with a “rage for order” (line 52). Ultimately, I hope to make a case for the poetics of “The Idea of Order at Key West” as being a schizo literary machine that provides what Deleuze-Guattari call the “eminently psychotic and revolutionary means of escape [from oedipalization]” (134).

Formal literary convention itself is a kind of “idea of order” insofar as it can be understood as a way of arranging or compartmentalizing literary information. Yet, originality (a convention in itself) requires the poet to manipulate convention in ever new and provocative ways. Stevens engages schizophrenic formal activity not so much to establish space for himself in the literary canon, as Harold Bloom might suggest, but rather for the sheer sake of what Deleuze-Guattari call thinking and expressing “otherwise.” The difference is one of degree, but Bloom’s is an egoistic, purely utilitarian ideal—a how-to guide for the would-be literary star. By contrast, Deleuze-Guattari’s ethics and Stevens’ actual poetry have a fractured kind of spiritual didacticism. They provide models for how to live.

Deleuze-Guattari describe the functioning of desire in the “socius” (139) as a series of deterritorializations and reterritorializations very similar to the schizo’s breakdowns and breakthroughs. Because, as Deleuze-Guattari suggest, “every position of desire, no matter how small, is capable of calling into question the established order of a society” (xxiii), desire is constantly being coded, or territorialized, and thus its revolutionary potential is defused. “Desiring-production” (1 ff), on the other hand, always seeks to outmaneuver these codes by means of endless addition. Whenever the machines of desire grind to a halt and relations (or flows) become frozen, as Deleuze-Guattari say they must in the schizophrenic climate of late capitalism, “desiring-machines” (1 ff) find ways of starting up again. Desire changes direction, plugging itself into other desiring-machines in endlessly complicated ways until it encounters other coding mechanisms (variously referred to in Deleuze-Guattari as the “body without organs” [9 ff] or “antiproduction” [55 ff]—revisionary metaphors for the Saussurian signerifier), at which point relations are arrested again. Reality, for Deleuze-Guattari, is a smooth space somewhat like a pinball machine, over which desire bounces hysterically and horizontally, gaining intensity before it shoots violently through the glass.
As noted above, Stevens’ use of formal convention in “The Idea of Order at Key West” emphasizes the schizophrenic play already coded into the notion of literary expression. The poem’s form itself, the “arrangement” of its sounds, manifests the kind of overinclusion characteristic of clinical schizophrenia—a psycho-linguistic phenomenon in which the superfluity of options makes any one choice impossible. Lauren Slater has described it as “not so much a damaged language capacity but a terribly untamed one that [can] not resist the intrusion of any subject” (101). Clearly, Stevens does not literally suffer from schizophrenia. Nonetheless, his poetic does borrow characteristics from schizoid phenomena, most notably what Deleuze-Guattari call the cycle of “breakdowns and breakthroughs” that by turns shackle and emancipate the ideal schizo.

Stevens is especially attracted to devices of repetition and difference. Examples of anaphora, assonance, alliteration, and self-conscious rhyme crowd “The Idea of Order at Key West” like madcap, disembodied voices—perpetual reminders that the “idea” of order is virtually impossible to maintain. Like snippets of overheard conversation, musical effects surface out of the swirl of sound, become coherent, and just as quickly disperse again into chaos. The sound of the poem’s first line, “She sang beyond the genius of the sea,” with its incantatory recurrence of “e” sounds (she, be, ge, and sea), suggests a uniform harmony, a kind of “medleyed sound” (line 9) for lack of a better term, that is at cross purposes with the line’s sense. This tension between sound and sense continues in the next line with the “o” sounds in “formed,” “or,” and “voice” and is further complicated in the next five lines by conspicuously repeated words like “body” (line 3) and the “constant cry . . . constantly a cry” pairing (line 5), the alliteration of “mimic motion / Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry” (lines 5–6), and the recurrence of assonant vowel sounds in “body,” “constant,” and “caused” or “motion,” “although,” and “ocean.” Whereas the poem’s argument in lines 1–7 establishes clear distinctions between the human and the natural: “water never formed to mind or voice” (line 2), the poem’s sound reinforces the sense of identity that is also present in Stevens’ anthropomorphic descriptions of nature: “a body wholly body” (line 3).

Furthermore, the poem hosts a predominance of strong “s” sounds—“For she was the maker of the song she sang” (line 15; emphasis mine) is a particularly good example as is the phrase “Theatrical distances, bronze shadows heaped / On high horizons, mountainous atmospheres” (lines 31–32; emphasis mine). The effect is much the same as that of the normalizing assonant vowel sounds discussed above, with the exception that “s” sounds in the poem occur with such frequency that the sound itself evolves into a sort of musical theme as the poem unfolds. As with the assonant vowel sounds, the hard “s” sound repeats so conspicuously that the sound overpowers the poem’s sense. Read aloud, the poem ebbs and flows on these “s” sounds.
The poem, like the sea and the woman’s song in line 28, threatens to become “sound alone.” From a schizoanalytic perspective, this kind of collapse is what makes for real literature, as Deleuze-Guattari put it: “That is what style is, or rather the absence of style—asyntactic, agrammatical: the moment when language is no longer defined by what it says . . . but by what causes it to move . . . a process and not a goal, a production and not an expression” (133). But, Stevens immediately goes on to insist, the sea, the song, and the poem are “more than that” (line 28), infinitely more in fact. The sea, for example in lines 38–40, does have an identity of its own (“Whatever self it had”), but the identity is constantly absorbed by the woman’s song (“[it] became the self / That was her song”). As with the linguistic chaos of overinclusion, even seemingly simple sounds operate in endlessly complex ways, carrying more potential meanings than they can possibly transmit. Similarly, the seemingly distinct sounds in “The Idea of Order at Key West” depend on other sounds for their own “distinctness.” As words depend on phonemes and constantly threaten to collapse back into random sound, so the sounds in “The Idea of Order at Key West” rely on each other.

From a formal standpoint, “The Idea of Order at Key West” immediately exhibits characteristics of what Deleuze-Guattari call “desiring-production,” and the tension in the poem between sound and sense especially seems to embody its conceptual concern with difference and repetition. Deleuze-Guattari suggest that the “reality of an object, insofar as it is produced by desire, is . . . a psychic reality . . . desire produces reality” (25–30). As in Deleuze-Guattari’s explanation of the way desire operates, however, Stevens’ desiring music is always ambivalent, turning on and dismantling itself only to reinvent and dismantle itself again. For Deleuze-Guattari, this must be true because they see no difference between absolute flow and absolute stoppage: “it amounts to the same to say that everything would pass or flow . . . or on the contrary, that everything would be blocked” (163)—both are forms of what Deleuze-Guattari call antiproduction or the body without organs. Paradoxically, desire and its revolutionary energies cannot exist without repression. Ultimately, all three forms of music in “The Idea of Order at Key West” (sea, song, and poem) are stand-ins for desire, which in its multiplicity has a reality that is as real as or more real than any one fixed or coded version of reality.

Stevens’ frequent decision to modify images with themselves or subtle variations of themselves (“body wholly body”; “Made . . . cry, caused . . . cry”; “uttered word by word”; “Whose spirit . . . the spirit that we sought”; “deep air . . . speech of air”; “summer sound / Repeated in a summer . . . / And sound alone”; “Whatever self . . . became the self”) betrays a formal overinclusion, at once threatening to reduce the poem’s meaning and at the same time expanding the range of possible meanings. The effect that these repetitions have on the ear is similarly schizophrenic. On one hand, since verbatim repetition is in many ways the most extreme manifestation
of rhyme, since a word is simultaneously the perfect and the impossible rhyme for itself, a word’s conspicuous repetition draws a bold auditory analogy between the line’s sound and the idea of order. This analogy can in turn echo similar analogies and/or disanalogies in the argument of the text. The sound of “body wholly body,” for example, suggests a confident, almost inevitable appropriateness at the same time that the sense of the phrase suggests an array of diffuse meanings—a self-conscious moment of semantic collapse (that is, the “body” of water is itself but also embodied in the woman’s song and in the poem; it has an existence of its own but one that is intricately linked to all other existence).

Stevens’ intermittent use of rhyme in “The Idea of Order at Key West” produces a complicated sound effect. By craftily injecting internal and end rhymes, Stevens seems to be playing with the pre-modernist expectation that poetry must, by definition, operate in closed form. Thus, the rhymes in the second stanza of “The Idea of Order at Key West” (“sea” and “she” in line 8 and “heard,” “word,” “stirred,” and “heard” at the ends of lines 10–14) draw attention to the relative lack of rhyme patterning elsewhere in the poem. The effect of the rhymes is jarring in this context and suggests a kind of rebelliousness, albeit limited, and ultimately a challenge to order. With a simple subversive gesture, Stevens here reverses the auditory effect he has established already in the poem with the use of repetitive sounds. Moreover, Stevens has also omitted rhyme at the end of three of the seven lines in the second stanza. This disruption of a pattern that is itself disruptive further suggests the profound ambivalence between order and chaos that carries the poem and gives it a demonic charge.

Given the tension generated by aural features in “The Idea of Order at Key West,” Stevens’ imagery initially seems cautious. The poem’s two key figures, for example—the sea and the woman singing beside it—immediately establish a traditional binary between human imagery and natural imagery. As Deleuze-Guattari point out, however, “man and nature are not like two opposite terms confronting each other—not even in the sense of bipolar opposites within a relationship of causation, ideation, or expression (cause and effect, subject and object, etc.); rather, they are one and the same essential reality, the producer-product” (4–5). Establishing this tenuous split, collapsing it, and trying to establish it again is the key drama played out in the poem’s imagery. Pursuing the impossible intensities spinning out of and back onto the relationship between humankind and nature—the ways they strive to delineate each other’s difference but just as surely reflect one another—gives the imagery in “The Idea of Order at Key West” its schizophrenic pulse.

All of the poem’s imagery—natural and anthropomorphic—describes one nebulous reality: the flows of desire. Furthermore, this imagery seeks to make the flows of desire palpable—and palatable, Deleuze-Guattari would argue—by inscribing (or coding) them. Ultimately, as mentioned above, desire resists coding through incessant new connections. Even, and
perhaps especially, at the level of poetic imagery (another term for the act of “naming”), desire tends to test its limit and then veer wildly in the opposite direction. Such is the case with Stevens’ imagery in “The Idea of Order at Key West,” resulting in unstable images that often tend toward the extremes of both abstraction and specificity without effectively coming to rest in either, hovering instead somewhere above the two in what Deleuze-Guattari call “disjunctive synthesis” (76 ff).

Deleuze-Guattari recognize the distance between contradictory elements generally understood as binary opposition but emphasize at the same time that this distance, insofar as it is instrumental to the existence of elements at either end of it, is a kind of connection. Schizophrenia, as Deleuze-Guattari describe it, provides a way of seeing the true “synthetic” nature of reality. By means of a kind of epistemology of overinclusion, the schizo is able to hover over disjunctions in a way that is liberating. As Deleuze-Guattari describe it,

He is not simply bisexual, or between the two, or intersexual. He is transsexual. He is trans-alivedead, trans-parentchild. He does not reduce two contraries to an identity of the same; he affirms their distance as that which relates the two as different. He does not confine himself inside contradictions; on the contrary, he opens out. (77)

Stevens’ imagery does a similar kind of hovering. His word pictures are not abstract, concrete, or between the two. They are trans-abstractconcrete.

On many levels, the sea in “The Idea of Order at Key West” is an image of what Deleuze-Guattari call “desiring-production.” Water’s protean physical characteristics paired with the ebb and flow of the tides embody desire’s schizophrenic progress through phases of production and anti-production. Contrary to the Freudian/Lacanian understanding of desire as lack, this vision of desire as an enormous, shape-shifting mass—a productive one no less (Stevens describes it as “our origins” [line 55])—is one of endless variation and addition. The poem’s highly compressed representation of the sea—“a body wholly body” (line 3)—swerves between abstract and concrete intensities. On one hand, description of the sea as a body draws on conventional representation—water as a bounded aggregate of matter. On the other hand, however, the punning emphasis implied in “wholly body” suggests the essential metaphoricity of the term “body” and opens the description out as Deleuze-Guattari’s schizo opens out when confronting disjunctions. Thus, in its various, conflicting connotations, the image of the sea operates as a schizophrenic machine, connecting to multiple conceptual assemblages, requiring those assemblages be held in suspension together, despite their contrariety, to form a new “body.”
The poem’s preceding description of the sea as never having “formed to mind or voice” (line 2) provides a disconcerting image of a partially formed, freakish body. The implication seems to be that the sea is at best an inchoate version of the human form. The image of the “body wholly body” that follows contradicts this conclusion, though, and points up further instability in the poem’s argument. Appropriately enough, the “mindless,” “voiceless” sea can be read as a metaphor for what Deleuze-Guattari call the “body without organs.” Like the schizoanalytic term, appropriated from Antonin Artaud’s writings, the sea in “The Idea of Order at Key West” is “without parts, a complete body lacking in orifices . . . [operating] entirely by insufflation, respiration, evaporation, and fluid transmission . . . entirely quantitative without codes or qualities” (Goodchild 77).

As mentioned earlier, the “body without organs” is another term for antiproduction and provides a way of talking about the paradoxical, schizophrenic way desire functions. At every level, desire requires its own repression in order to exist. Stevens is obviously anxious that a word as highly charged with anthropomorphic associations as “body” might, through multiplicity, become meaningless. The grotesqueness of the mindless, voiceless image and its defensive stance, as well as the normalizing device of modifying the image of “body” with itself, represent Stevens’ attempt to rein in the image’s meaning, to code the multiple concepts conveyed by the term “body,” to segregate them, and thus to establish an ordered vision.

As noted, countless scholars have tried to synchronize Stevens’ theoretical ambitions with the actual material in his poems. As early as 1965, Denis Donoghue picks up on Stevens’ struggle to cast the sea as sterile and inhuman in his book *Connoisseurs of Chaos*. According to Donoghue, critical consensus has held the sea to be “reality” in “The Idea of Order at Key West.” Donoghue supports this reading by establishing two oppositions: one between reality and the imagination and another between chaos and order. He insists that there is a point for point correspondence between reality and chaos and another between the imagination and order. According to Donoghue’s argument, Stevens is looking for a secular refuge from a world that does not care. The sea in this case represents the bundle of chaos and reality, whereas art represents imagination and order. The singer’s song and the poem itself in this reading represent the victory of the imagination’s order over the chaos of reality (190–214).

As antiquated as Donoghue’s approach may seem, more current scholarship on “The Idea of Order at Key West” typically is informed by similar hermeneutics. La Guardia insists on the “total separateness of song and sea,” suggesting that the poem is an “allegory of the poetic process . . . [w]ith the woman as poet and the sea as reality” (61). Furthermore, La Guardia argues, “[the singer] translates the chaos of nature into a higher form, momentarily ordering it within the mind” (63). In *Wallace Stevens Revisited: “The Celestial Possible*,” Janet McCann, likewise, reads the drama
of “The Idea of Order at Key West” as a cipher for Stevens’ personal and psychological biography:

The only way to deal with the negative realities of the present is to accept them as the base of reality with which the imagination must deal. The impoverished present lacks a vitalizing myth; it is up to the poet to produce such a myth. . . . [“The Idea of Order at Key West’] includes one of Stevens’ earlier suggestions that the poetic impulse is a hallowed one, sanctioned. The results of this “blessed rage” are a redefinition, or perhaps a more precise understanding, of what it is to be human. (32–33)

In both of these later readings, Donoghue’s essential categories remain intact and the correspondence between Stevens’ intention and his accomplishment is preserved.

As I have already mentioned, the schizoanalyst must read the sea as desire, which is by turns both order and chaos. The imagination must be the same, composed of desire, a maelstrom of order and chaos. Reality, in this sense, is the flows of desire, which circulate freely between the artificial categories Donoghue and others wish to establish. If anything, Stevens’ modification of the description of the “body” of the sea with “wholly body” portrays not so much reality’s assimilation into the world of imagination as it does a serious insecurity about the distinction between different sorts of bodies.

By comparing the sea’s movement to human clothing (“fluttering / Its empty sleeves” [lines 3–4]), Stevens’ imagery further contradicts the distinction his image of the mindless, voiceless body tries to establish. In effect, although the sea may initially seem strictly inhuman, it is in fact always both human and inhuman—trans-humaninhuman. Even as the poem argues that the sea is “merely a place” (line 17), that it is alien to the artist and imagination, its imagery suggests that sea and artist are composed of the same stuff. Stevens may, in fact, long for a division between man and nature and/or between imagination and reality, but he cannot maintain one in the machinery of his images.

If the poem’s presentation of the sea is ambiguous, its presentation of the singer is even more elusive. In fact, though the speaker consistently refers to this singing creature with the third person singular feminine pronoun and explains that she is “striding” (line 41) (and so presumably has legs), the most specific or descriptive references to her—“maker” (line 15) and “artificer” (line 37)—are completely abstract and scarcely provide a concrete visual picture. Stevens clearly intends her to be a godlike figure but gives little indication that she is created in humankind’s image. Whereas the sea comes to look more and more human as the poem unfolds, consistently modified by anthropomorphic metaphors (“cry[ing],” “grinding,”
“gasping,” “ever-hooded,” “tragic-gestured”), the singer is described more as a vessel for the sea’s humanlike behavior than she is described as human herself (“what she sang was what she heard” [line 10]; “in all her phrases stirred / The grinding water” [lines 12–13]). Here, the only way Stevens can describe the singer/maker is in the terms of her song.

Citing the song’s assimilation of the sea’s “self,” Donoghue effectively announces the singer’s victory as a hero of the imagination over the randomness of reality: “the situation is entirely favorable to the imagination; the figure is all imagination and the reality—such as it is—is merely a function of the imagination” (210). La Guardia and McCann assume a similar, if not so boldly stated, conclusion. All three, however, notably avoid examining ways that the singer’s self also seems to be assimilated by the sea. Even Brooke Baeten’s attempt to account for instability in the poem vis-à-vis a Lacanian apparatus ignores the intermittent disintegration of the singer’s self. Instead, Baeten also maintains the binaries between singer and sea, imagination and nature, restating their significance in terms of Stevens’ psychology:

The poem itself is an examination of the individual in relation to reality, which for Stevens requires that the individual abstract reality and employ the imagination to transform the chaotic relationship between self and reality into a relationship of order. (31)

Baeten’s analysis of Stevens’ psychology relies heavily on the poet’s generalized intentions and on others’ analyses of “The Idea of Order at Key West.” Baeten’s conclusion is: “[I]n order for Stevens to fulfill the role of the poet, he must possess a confidence in his identity as a poet. In order to obtain that kind of coherent understanding of himself, Stevens must observe his own mirror image [in the singer]” (31). This amounts to a substitution of prevailing critical consensus into a Lacanian framework.

Such substitution is not supportable in a close reading of “The Idea of Order at Key West.” More often than not, in fact, images in “The Idea of Order at Key West” representing either the sea or the singer establish a chain of overlapping references to one another. The image of the “genius of the sea” in the poem’s first line, for example, simultaneously evokes the sea’s independent self as a function of its innate physical and preternatural force and the singer’s potential role as a human representative of the place—the sea in human form. Because the term “genius” strongly suggests faculties of the human intellect, however, the image also compares the sea with products of the human mind. The image suspends producer and product in such a way that it is impossible to establish which is which. Instead, it presents the sea and the singer as one volatile producer-product.
The poem claims that the singer embodies her song and its subject (“Whatever self [the sea] had, became the self / That was her song” [lines 39–40]; “it was she and not the sea we heard” [line 14]). In this sense, the sea’s body is “wholly” the singer’s body. At the same time, however, the poem’s actual description of the song betrays the sea’s sustained vitality in its own right. The sea is the numinous charge beneath the singer’s song. It “stir[s]” in all her phrases.

The clearest description of the song itself comes at the end of the fourth stanza:

The meaningless plungings of water and the wind,  
Theatrical distances, bronze shadows heaped  
On high horizons, mountainous atmospheres  
Of sky and sea. (lines 31–33)

The poem claims that this song would be “sound alone” (line 28) if it were not more than “the dark voice of the sea” (line 21), but goes on to concede that it is also “More even than [the singer’s] voice” (line 29). The implication is that if it were not more than her voice, if it were not both the singer’s voice and the “dark voice of the sea,” the song would not be a song at all but “sound alone.” Thus the image of the song becomes another example of the schizophrenic producer-product, a disjunctive synthesis of singer and sea that hovers above them and “affirms their distance as that which relates the two as different” (Deleuze-Guattari 77).

As with the image of the sea, the images of the singer and her song manifest characteristics of both “desiring-machines” and the “body without organs,” which suggests they are made of the same stuff as the sea. Insofar as each of the three images is instrumental to the existence of the other two, it is easy to read any one as the origin (or “maker”) of the others. The sea is an essential component in the song’s genesis, a muse-like force almost feeding the singer her lines (“what she sang was what she heard” [line 10]). In this sense, the schizophrenic, desiring process that takes place in the image of the sea prefigures that which makes the singer’s song. Biologically speaking, the sea is also the cradle of existence (“our origins” [line 55]), which strongly aligns it with the idea of the maker. On the other hand, as the poem insists, the sea’s meaning is also conveyed by the singer and the song in a new form, as if its meaning were grafted on to a new and different reality, the world the singer “sang and, singing, made” (line 43).

Furthermore, the poem itself is also an example of the desiring-machine and the body without organs, vacillating in its own way between having the “mind or voice” mentioned in its second line and falling into a kind of paralyzing autism. In many ways the whole of “The Idea of Order at Key West” is what Deleuze-Guattari would describe as a “molar” conglomerate of “molecular” processes occurring within it. Again, the molar
body represents antiproduction or a “functionalism that did not go far enough” (181). The explosive connections are taking place inside it, and they are responsible for the “magical chain [that] brings together plant life, pieces of organs, a shred of clothing, an image of daddy, formulas and words” (181). All of these seemingly disparate elements come together to form machines; these machines serve as molecular elements connecting inside larger molar assemblages. The waves, piss, *Jaws*, hydrogen, Jules Verne, fluttering sleeves, and oxygen, maybe, make a sea, which, sandwiched between a million other psychotic connections, makes a poem, which anthologized makes a canon.

At times, however, “The Idea of Order at Key West” looks less like a molar body and more like one among many molecular elements. The poem’s penultimate stanza with its rhetorical question to Ramon Fernandez marks a sea change in the speaker’s perspective. In the aftermath of the singer’s song, the poem’s speaker sees reality differently. In effect, the machine of his song (the poem) connects to the machine of the singer’s song, which has already connected to the machine of the sea’s song. The “glassy lights” that impress the speaker in line 46 are the representatives of this new machine that serves the dual, contradictory functions of “Arranging” and “deepening” the “enchanting night” (line 51). The light’s “arranging” function suggests that this newest version of reality “orders” or “codes” the potentially chaotic night similar to the way Donoghue argues the imagination, as depicted by the song, orders reality, as depicted by the sea. The light’s “deepening” function, on the other hand, suggests a kind of schizo opening out, a realization of the immanent disorder below the surface of the codes. The speaker celebrates the “rage” for order, which suggests both that the endeavor to order is frustrated and ultimately impossible and that its limit defines the drama of existence. Finally, the speaker must concede that the maker’s victories over disorder are always qualified; the divisions he/she can establish between desiring-machines is “ghostly” even as the attempt to establish divisions perpetuates the flows of desire and produces new, “keener” desiring-machines.

Despite this ultimate resolution, Stevens does in fact struggle to “overcode” the flows of desire throughout much of the poem, struggles to act as what Deleuze-Guattari call the “despot,” and to force contrary inscriptions to coexist in the body of the poem in a way that “makes desire into the property of the sovereign” (199), or in this case of the poet. If “The Idea of Order at Key West” were truly about Stevens’ willingness to “entertain reality only when it has been refracted through the idiom of art, when the artist has certified it by giving it the seal of his own authority” (194), as Donoghue suggests, then Stevens might have achieved his despotic ambition as Donoghue seems to think he has. Unfortunately for Donoghue’s reading, though, the crusty, old Intentional Fallacy keeps crawling from the sea to contradict him. “The Idea of Order at Key West” is about the vicissitudes of desire, not Stevens’ pet ideas about the imagination.
Ultimately, Stevens cannot sustain a “despotic signifier,” a phenomenon that Deleuze-Guattari describe as

a flattening out or a set of biunivocal relations that leads to the breakaway and elevation of a detached object, and the linearization of the chain that derives from this object . . . from which all the signs uniformly flow in a deterritorialized flow of writing. (205–06)

Although Stevens may wish, with his own song, to overcode the territorial chains represented by the song of the sea and by the song of the singer and transform those signifieds to “precisely the effect of [his] signifier, and not what [they] represent or what [they] designate” (Deleuze-Guattari 209), he cannot do it. Instead, he watches in amazement as the signifiers of the sea, the singer/song, and the poem become the signifieds of one another with no fixed, “detached object on which the whole of the chain depends, and that spreads over the chain the effects of signification” (Deleuze-Guattari 207). The poem operates, as uncoded desire does, like a language that lacks key immutable phonetic relationships. It is productive. That is, it signifies, but in a revolutionary way. Stevens’ poetics, as materially practiced in “The Idea of Order at Key West,” destroy his theoretical postulations and undermine the Oedipal (or commodity) form of literature. The poem does not reproduce the tracing of an intention or an unconscious. Instead, it produces an unconscious as it goes. Ever graphing new possibilities and new connections, it is irreducible and electric.

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Works Cited


Sunrise; Poem

—after “A Room on a Garden”

A bus in northwest Indiana,
Encircled in the silk arcana
Of dawn.

The landscape’s scattered parking lots
And plazas, strip malls, blocky plots
Of gray

The bus bisects in ordered lines.
Within its steel a thin light shines
Upon

A seated reader reading Stevens—
Moonlight to the roomy heavens’
New sun.

Unseen the misty similes
Of rising mist, the ravens, geese
In flight,

Or seen within the poem’s wake.
Its rhymes align. Its stanzas break
Like day.

Damion Searls
Oakland, California
Drifting aimlessly, head a big balloon,
I floated to the bookstore, saw her there,
And roamed there all the stupid afternoon.

The books I read I couldn’t read; the room
Was too distracting. She was everywhere,
Drifting aimlessly, my head a big balloon

Tugged behind her on a string—buffoon
With smiley face on front; but I didn’t care,
And roamed there all the stupid afternoon.

Or did I? Day was past the height of noon,
And all I loved had lost its steady glare.
Drifting aimlessly, head a big balloon

Empty of effort, weightless, useless, how soon
Would it be dragging listless in the air
To roam there, all the stupid afternoon

Of life gone by, in twilight? For the moon
Outside was fixing me with a ghostly stare—
Who drifted aimlessly, head a big balloon,
And roamed there all the stupid afternoon.

Jason Koo
Houston, Texas
On the Idea

To live in the place where spiders
sway like moons on dazzling cords,
where flowers’ cold red fire
grows to swallow blue sky’s sun—

A woman walks from a poet’s mind
along the beach where song is breaking
waves from a living reef of shells
and coral pulsing dark and light.
To him she turns,
to him she talks,
to him she reaches one smooth hand
on which an emerald glistens—

in words we risk everything
in silence hunger listens—

To live in the place where dusk
falls soft as fingers in warm sand,
where brown birds’ flashing wings
splash salt water into stars—

The poet eats his tangerines
and offers one to no one there
and swallows music sweet with seeds
and hears the woman sing again.
To her he breathes,
to her he moves,
to her he spins from deepest belly
blossoms shoreline night—

connection is perfection’s face;
in language we find sight.

Katharyn Howd Machan
Ithaca, New York
Eight Variations on a Landscape with Swallows

I
I am in Iowa,
on the edge of town
and all the space in the world
will never help. Or
the sunlight. Or the omelets
I make for my wife
so she can remember
La Gran Via and Las Ramblas.
She wants to be a bird
flying above Barcelona
until she tires.
She wants to be a bird
and sit on someone’s sill
and watch the streets
as if from their eyes.
She hardly sleeps.
She moves her hands
in circles above her head.
Her baths are long.
The bed and her shoes
are too big. Each night
she tells me
I might wake
and find feathers on our sheets.

II
She has grown
fearful of
sunrise. It melts
the frost on the foxtail,
discolors the sky and
the power plant
steam. She says
the squirrels in the oak
have started to
treat her like a bird; they
are aloof; she is offended.

III
Life would never be
like it had been
when the birds
with silver-blue bellies
flitted and glided
from chimneys to trees.
They played
with shadows
all afternoon
like a child
surrounded by space,
grass and time.
A day to do nothing
but watch
swallows fly:
forgotten or never
known, beautiful
as they flew,
beautiful above
the ground, radiant.

IV
She wore a feather
hat. Her favorite
color, a rush
of black, red and blue—
just like moments
before sunset.
She thinks her soul
is filled with the beauty
of what remains
after it has gone, after
the sun has set and dark,
like the tail tips
of swallows,
covers everything.

V
She wears her favorite
gown—blue, sleek,
echoes of dark,
open at the back
as if leaving
room for wings.
Her feet have
become invisible.
She no longer listens
when I say I don’t have feathers on my sleeve.  
When she sleeps  
the air around her becomes sacred.  
The shower water glides off her skin.  
She has become small enough to fit in my hand.  
Her eyes are always moving,  
her lungs beat urgently. She fears;  
she hears noises unlike other noises.

VI  
She stands on the corner of Elm and Birch watching the maples;  
her skin shimmers in front of the sun,  
the traffic thins;  
she watches the sound of tree-hidden swallows;  
she picks at the threads clinging to her sleeves.  
The sun sets.  
The trees are silent.  
Feathers the color of sky fall from the branches,  
black tipped as if singed by fire, as if mimicking the approach of night.

VII  
Every morning I descend the steps so I can be here waiting for the sun to rise.  
At this moment I’d give anything to be shoes, distance of gravel roads,  
the dark, a plank gate
slap against the barn,
the smell of leather,
of cattle, hay and straw,
a speck of grain dust.
The sky burns as if
lit by burning swallows,
the tips of their tails.

VIII
Outside this window
there are sun,
and snow, and
a woman dressed in blue.
She is beautiful
because the birds
have stopped singing—
they honor beauty
with their silence.
She waits for the light
to change. Her breath
hangs beside her
as she looks up at the tree
and its silent birds
and waits. She could
have just climbed
out of the earth,
spring could be waiting
behind her, and the swallows
the first to see her radiance,
in awe that someone
can be this beautiful,
that someone can exist
as alone as she is.

Curtis Bauer
Iowa City, Iowa
The Burden of What Flickered in the Light

I
The grass was wound with fictions such as these:
That it withstood the wind, perpetual,
That coursed along the margin of the sea,
And that the rising sea bit at the sand,
And that the sand crept slowly toward the sea
Losing itself among the indigoes.

Say of the indigoes, that they revolved
Around the tilting axis of the sea.
Say that sea-grass rooted as she walked
Beneath the treatise of the summer sky.
Say that she spoke in ancient languages.
Say of the grass that it was full of ghosts.

II
Say of the leaves that they were thick
With frugal smoke that rose from frugal fires
And that the shadows flickered past the trunks
The way her fingers passed before the light
Casting it in twisted filigrees
That spread along the narrow passage walls.

Say that the bones were laughing as they lay
Beneath the evening canopy of trees
As though the skeletons themselves were filigrees.

Say that the leaves were wound with fictions such as these
Though slim cartographers traversed the earth
Marking off the boundaries of the stars.

III
The night was fraught with fictions such as these:
That savage constellations filled the dark
With warnings in an undeciphered script,
And that the summer stars were creased and split
By cellists who sat among the walnut trees
Playing fugues that faded like a cry.
Say of the simple darkness of the sky
That it was empty, like the naught of day.
Say of the dark that it was cold and stale.

Say also that it was the screen of mind
On which she threw the fiction of the grass
Moving in green and silver, like the leaves,
Moving the cliffs that labored toward the sea,
And sending starlings ringing from the trees.
Say that she was also wound with fictions such as these.

A. E. Shaw
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

The River Time

Across the river racing by behind
the halted vines, the trees that normally
are beaded by the buds of spring are bare

and, blank, a figure combs the river bank
for unused bits of distances the sunlight
would have spent if there had been a viewer

and a viewed, for nonexistent images
the voice from the adjacent room will fit
as silences into the instances

that bloom or, hard, are hammered out of things
that, though it’s spring, refuse, like stones set in
the river lined with irises, to move.

Robert Noreault
Massena, New York
You know how it is: while preparing to teach or write about a Wallace Stevens poem, you remember reading a helpful essay in a past issue of *The Wallace Stevens Journal*. Or you have dutifully searched the MLA bibliography, on compact disk or in printed copy, for articles about a particular poem. But you suspect that important commentary has eluded you, perhaps because the poem is not named in a title or picked up as a subject by the bibliographer. What to do next? In the past, if you had the good fortune to own a complete run of *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, you could pull each issue from the bookshelf and skim the table of contents, hoping that a title might jog your memory or point the way to buried treasure.

Now there is an easier way. John N. Serio, the editor of *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, has produced a CD that contains all fifty-one issues of the Journal published through Fall 2001 (twenty-five years’ worth) and its rarely seen predecessor, *The Wallace Stevens Newsletter* (four issues). These are reproduced in PDF format, so with Adobe Acrobat Reader (self-loading from the CD) you can view every page exactly as it appeared in print. From a menu that reproduces the covers along with the dates, you can choose an issue and browse its contents. This procedure is especially useful for the special issues, such as those on Stevens and Women (Fall 1988) and International Perspectives on Stevens (Fall 2001). As you leaf virtually through the issue, a Bookmarks window on the left shows the table of contents and indicates in boldface type which selection you are reading.

But here—given your quandary—is the best part: you can search all issues of the Journal and Newsletter for occurrences of a word or phrase. Suppose, for example, that you want to find all mentions of the poem “Earthy Anecdote.” You choose the Search for a word or phrase option on the main menu, which opens a search window. When you enter “Earthy Anecdote” in the window and click the Search button, a Search Results window comes up, listing the sixteen issues in which that phrase appears. Following the Adobe protocol, those listed first contain the most numerous mentions of the search term. You click View to see the first reference to “Earthy Anecdote” in the first listing, which happens to be the Fall 1998 issue. The Next Highlight button on the toolbar takes you to the next occurrence, and so on through the sixteen issues.

For “Earthy Anecdote” the search turns up a few surprises, items that you might not discover in a conventional bibliography. There is, for example, Walter Pach’s note regarding his illustration of the poem, which Stevens laid in one of his books (Fall 1978 issue). There are also musical settings of the poem (Fall 1992 and Fall 1993) and a letter regarding the possible inclusion of the word “firecat” in a future edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Fall 1997). Be-
cause the search scans the notes and works cited as well as the body of published articles, it may suggest relevant reading outside The Wallace Stevens Journal.

Once you have located the passage that prompted the search, or any other that piques your interest, you have several options. You can simply read the passage, using the display features in Adobe Acrobat Reader to scroll up or down the page, zoom in and out, or navigate between widely separated pages using the Thumbnails in the left margin. You can use the Text Select tool on the toolbar to copy and paste a selected passage into a word processor file. (This feature is usually not available for journals that have been digitized, such as the on-line American Literature. However, you may have to do some minor editing when selecting passages from early issues of the Stevens Journal, which were optically scanned.) You can print out pages for later reference. Or you can copy the PDF file for an entire issue onto your hard drive, where it can be called up in a resident copy of Adobe Acrobat Reader.

You can return to the main menu whenever you wish by clicking the Home Page icon on the toolbar, a nifty feature that Serio added, or the Return to Home Page option in the Bookmarks window. You might, for example, need a refresher course on using the toolbar. The Get Help feature is so informative that you may wish to start your tour of the CD there. It quickly and painlessly acquaints the less adept—users like me—with the indispensable Adobe Acrobat Reader tools. When you have a few minutes to spare, you can use the main menu to access a four-page history of The Wallace Stevens Society, adapted from John Serio’s entry in the 1999 Dictionary of Literary Biography Yearbook. The menu also provides a link to the Web site of The Wallace Stevens Society and, of course, an Exit from the program. An attractive feature of the CD is that nothing gets installed on your computer.

As every reader of this journal knows, Wallace Stevens claimed to have written a poem that took the place of a mountain. That is a monumentally tall tale. With far less exaggeration, John Serio might claim to have replaced a mountain of printed paper with his silver disk. The Wallace Stevens Journal has become, over the last quarter-century, a prominent and admired feature of the literary landscape. It is all the greater now, for being so small.

Milton J. Bates
Marquette University

Law’s Interior: Legal and Literary Constructions of the Self.

For well over two decades, proponents of the “law and literature” movement in legal scholarship have looked to literature and literary criticism for insights into legal issues. Law and literature scholars have tended to make one or both of two claims about the relevance of literature for lawyers. Some extol literature as a source of moral guidance, a means of developing lawyers’ emotional intelligence or empathy. A second view, often associated with law and literature pioneer James Boyd White, emphasizes the linguistic qualities of judicial decisions and other legal documents. For these scholars, literary
analysis demonstrates that law is rhetorical and persuasive, rather than somehow neutral and objective.

Wallace Stevens did not figure prominently in early law and literature scholarship, but the 1990s brought a flurry of articles and books that looked to the lawyer-poet’s work for inspiration. The most important contribution was Thomas Grey’s excellent book, *The Wallace Stevens Case: Law and the Practice of Poetry*. Based on a careful and often strikingly insightful reading of Stevens’ poems, Grey argued that, although his poetry does not offer much support for either of the standard claims about the virtues of literature for law, Stevens’ preoccupation with the relationship between reality and the imagination echoes the long-standing tension in legal theory between the virtues of strict rules, on the one hand, and the desire for equity or fairness in each individual case, on the other.

Kevin Crotty’s book is the newest addition to this vibrant subgenre of Stevensian analysis. Although *Law’s Interior* does not break new ground in Stevens interpretation, the book is beautifully written and makes a compelling argument that Stevens’ preoccupation with finding what will suffice is as relevant to legal theory as it is to poetry.

The “interior” of law referred to in Crotty’s title is individual autonomy, or the self, as depicted in legal theory and in a series of Supreme Court cases dealing with constitutional rights. Crotty contends that our sense of self is constructed in important respects by law and the state. The process is “self-reflective” (a favorite word of Crotty’s), with the state shaping the individual while, at the same time, the individual also shapes the state. For Crotty, the traditional view that the self is rational and autonomous is therefore a fiction, but a crucially important fiction. It is a mistake, in his view, either to reject the notion of a self that is entitled to certain rights (as some radical legal scholars have done), or to succumb to the myth of truly autonomous individuals (as prominent philosophers John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin seem, in some respects, to do). For Crotty, literature serves as a corrective. “Imaginative works help us to take fictions seriously for, as self-conscious fictions, they illuminate the role of fiction more generally in human society and its institutions” (20).

Crotty develops this theme in three lengthy chapters. Stevens appears in the third and most important of the chapters. Stevens is very much the guiding spirit of *Law’s Interior*, and Crotty’s treatment of Stevens epitomizes both the strengths and limitations of the book. Before I turn to Stevens, however, let me briefly describe the two chapters that precede him.

Chapter 1 explores the role of law in Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*. “It was Aeschylus’ splendid idea,” Crotty tells us, that “the age-old, bloodcurdling tale” of Clytaemnestra’s murder of Agamemnon to avenge his sacrifice of their daughter, and Orestes’ murder of his mother Clytaemnestra in response, is “essentially a story about people’s search for justice” (39). The question of whether Orestes should be punished for killing his mother is finally resolved when, at the end of the trilogy, Athena introduces the jury system to Athens, and a sharply divided jury sets Orestes free. Aeschylus’ tragedy reveals a crucial tension between law and justice. Law enables us to resolve vexing societal dilemmas, but it often must ignore complexity or truncate inquiry in order to achieve
stability. Law is not “an illusion,” Crotty concludes, but “it is highly artificial, and sits uneasily on the mortal condition” (58).

In Chapter 2, the scene shifts to St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, which is often seen as the wellspring of our sense of self. Crotty emphasizes the complexity of Augustine’s depiction of the self as deeply conflicted and influenced by its surroundings. For Augustine, Crotty concludes, the act of confession is “a reflection on the self, and in particular on its contingency . . . and its radical dependency on a source outside itself [i.e., God]” (115). Crotty contrasts Augustine’s nuanced sense of self with the self as portrayed in the Supreme Court’s famous *Miranda* decision (which inspired the “you have the right to remain silent” standards for police interrogation). Crotty does not quibble with the outcome of *Miranda*, but he argues that the court should have adopted a more forthrightly Augustinian view of autonomy, one that more fully recognized the fragility of the self.

With Chapter 3, Stevens enters the stage. (So, too, does Jürgen Habermas, but Crotty concludes that Habermas’ communication theory is too optimistic about individual autonomy). Crotty begins Chapter 3 by asserting that, even in a world that does not share Augustine’s confidence in the reality of God, the need for imaginative projection from the messy realities of our lives and our institutions remains strong. Law responds by developing “idealizing fictions.” This, in Crotty’s view, is why constitutional rights are so important to American law. Crotty insists that rights are fictional, but he believes they are essential to our continual working out of the proper relationship between citizens and the nation’s legal and political institutions.

For even the most casual student of his poems, Stevens’ relevance to this project should be obvious, and Crotty points to “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” and other milestones in Stevens’ poetic search for “necessary fictions.” Interestingly, however, and perhaps surprisingly, Crotty places far more emphasis on another major Stevens poem, “Esthétique du Mal” (as well as two of Stevens’ essays, “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” and “Imagination as Value”). Of particular importance is Stevens’ suggestion that evil—which Crotty construes as “finitude, contingency, partialness: in a word, mortality” (174)—is unavoidable. Because evil is inescapable, it must inform even our conception of the good. One implication is that none of the fictions, no paradise, can be final; and Crotty contends that this is equally true for law. “The self,” he argues, “does not find its paradise in a perfect rationality. Rather, the rationality of law is a powerful and attractive simplification of ourselves, but one that can never be wholly or finally satisfying” (184).

As this overview suggests, Crotty is most interested in the general thrust of Stevens’ poetic, rather than the aesthetic intricacies of specific stanzas or lines. Crotty uses his account to explain the development of constitutional rights over the course of the twentieth century. In one of the book’s most intriguing insights, Crotty argues that Stevens and Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes responded to, and outflanked, the growing fascination with communism in similar ways. Holmes’s view of free speech rights as a marketplace of ideas suggests that communism is just one of many possible
approaches, much as Stevens treated communism as one among many imaginative fictions—and a somewhat inferior fiction at that.

Crotty believes that Holmes’s “marketplace of ideas” approach improves on prior conceptions of rights, but that he continues to rely on too optimistic a view of citizens’ rationality and autonomy. A more compelling perspective, he argues, is implicit (though not fully articulated) in the Supreme Court’s landmark decisions in Brown v. Board of Education and Roe v. Wade, which demonstrate a growing recognition of the pressures that influence individual autonomy. A robust view of rights, Crotty argues, must incorporate factors such as race and gender. Since rights are fictional and need continual adjustment, the process is never-ending. Rights, Crotty concludes, “are ‘poetic’—qualities we imaginatively ‘see in’ ourselves and then attempt to bring about. Like the Stevensian concept of the heroic or the noble, rights need to be continually reconceived” (211).

At several points, Crotty’s analysis calls to mind the book I referred to earlier, The Wallace Stevens Case. Crotty’s suggestion that Stevens shows that law must “trace[] a cyclical process of returning to and departing from simplicity (an easily understood and applied rule)” (184) restates a central theme of Grey’s book. One might have wished that Crotty had engaged Grey’s analysis more directly and explored the relationship between the two books, rather than simply dismissing The Wallace Stevens Case with the suggestion that Crotty explores “the connection between Stevens and law at a more abstract level” (162 n 33).

Another limitation of Law’s Interior can be traced to Crotty’s use of “Esthétique de Mal” as his central text. Siding with Harold Bloom’s praise of “Esthétique,” as against Helen Vendler’s more critical assessment, Crotty defends Stevens’ tendency to “distance[] or depersonalize[] the response to evil” as an effort to avoid the excessive pity inspired by the “deeply personal, engaged” stance of the romantics and their successors (178). This is accurate so far as it goes, but adopting so bloodless a definition of evil (“finitude, contingency, partialness”—in a sense, anything that makes us different or imperfect) forces Crotty into linguistic corners at times. Crotty suggests, for instance, rather astonishingly, that sex and race “are a ‘bad’ [that is, an evil] from the point of view of legal theory,” before assuring us that “the challenge . . . is to fashion a model that finds its good within this ‘bad’ ” (192). Crotty would have done better, in my view, to have left his earlier definition of evil behind at this point.

The great virtue of Crotty’s book is his use of Stevens’s preoccupation with the tension between reality and the imagination, together with Augustine and the Oresteia, to develop a striking argument as to the proper role of rights in American life. Although we may not agree with all of his assumptions and conclusions (most Americans, for instance, myself included, do not believe that religion is simply another fiction), the range of Crotty’s reading is remarkable, and he shows that Stevens’ poetic concerns continue to resonate with the deepest issues of American social, political, and legal life.

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