

# *The Wallace Stevens Journal*



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

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A Publication of The Wallace Stevens Society, Inc.

Volume 27

Number 1

Spring 2003

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

### Contents

Introduction: A Personal Reflection — <i>John N. Serio</i>	3
“A Moving Part of a Motion”: Place as <i>Poesis</i> in Stevens’ Poetry of the Earth — <i>Carol H. Cantrell</i>	7
The Westwardness of Everything: Irishness in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens — <i>Daniel Tobin</i>	27
Places for the Future to Come: Wallace Stevens and Frank Lloyd Wright — <i>Michael Beehler</i>	49
Family and Place in Wallace Stevens — <i>Justin Quinn</i>	65
Wallace Stevens’ “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”: The “Inescapable Romance” of Place — <i>Keith Manecke</i>	80
Place and Nothingness in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens — <i>Robert Pack</i>	97
Place and Poetry in Stevens’ “The Rock” — <i>Karen Helgeson</i>	116
Two Photographs of Wallace Stevens by Charles Henri Ford — <i>Erik La Prade</i>	132
Poems	136
Reviews	143
Current Bibliography	157

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*The Wallace Stevens Journal* is published biannually in the Spring and Fall by the Wallace Stevens Society, Inc. Administrative and editorial offices are located at Clarkson University, Box 5750, Potsdam, NY 13699. Phone: (315) 268-3987; Fax: (315) 268-3983; E-mail: serio@clarkson.edu; Web site: www.wallacestevens.com.

The subscription rate for individuals, both domestic and foreign, is \$25 for one year or \$45 for two years and includes membership in the Wallace Stevens Society. Rates for institutions are \$34 per year domestic and \$39 per year foreign. Back issues are available. Also available are volumes 1–25 on CD-ROM.

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

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

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



## Introduction: A Personal Reflection

JOHN N. SERIO

**T**HIS SPECIAL ISSUE on the subject of Wallace Stevens and his poetics of place has personal significance for me. Exactly thirty years ago, secluded in a five-by-five foot library carrel at the University of Notre Dame and armed with a state-of-the-art Smith Corona portable electric typewriter, I was diligently working on my dissertation on this topic. I seemed fated to have selected Stevens. I had never heard of him as an undergraduate in the early 1960s and I had never studied him in courses in either my master's program at Northwestern University in the mid-1960s or my Ph.D. program at Notre Dame in the early 1970s. But a seed had been planted during my first year of graduate study: on my twenty-second birthday, friends gave me a copy of *Poems by Wallace Stevens*, selected and edited by Samuel French Morse. I put it on my bookshelf.

After teaching for several years, I returned to graduate school in 1970 to pursue a doctorate. In one of my courses, an exceptionally good seminar on T. S. Eliot, students had to select a topic for a seminar paper from a long list prepared by the instructor. On that list was an item that attracted my attention: T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens. With the unread edition of Stevens' poems still sitting on my bookshelf—and still haunting me—I decided it was time to find out exactly who Wallace Stevens was.

That was the beginning of the end, to paraphrase Eliot, for it was love at first sight (or reading, in this case). Perhaps it had something to do with being immersed in Eliot's poetry, for in Stevens I found a refreshing exuberance and a stunning originality. I was immediately reminded of Keats's statement that if poetry come not as naturally as leaves to a tree, let it not come at all. Stevens was a poet born and not made (quite a contrast, to my mind, with Eliot, who, one will recall, dedicated "The Waste Land" to Ezra Pound as *il miglior fabbro*, the better "maker" or "craftsman"). I wrote a seminar paper on music in Eliot and Stevens, and this marked the beginning of my lifelong dedication to Stevens' poetry.

Two years later I selected Stevens as the subject of my dissertation. But what could I write about? Equipped with little more than the new critical approach, I read *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* from cover to cover. What I derived from that experience was a feeling, a deep impression or

intuition, if you will, that a sense of place was vital to his poetry. I was not sure what that perception meant or what role place played in his poetics, but I strongly felt its presence. I decided to concentrate on this aspect of his work. What emerged was an appreciative interpretation of Stevens that described a changing poetics as he moved from an early, self-limiting engagement with physical reality to a later, more abstract but mutually transforming interaction between person and place. What I discerned in Stevens was that a composition of place became the essential exercise in a composition of self, an act of the mind that was both liberating and ennobling.

Seeing "The Comedian as the Letter C" as the central, unifying poem of *Harmonium*, I argued that in his early poems Stevens examines the relationship between people and their surroundings from many perspectives. He observes how some dominate and thus destroy their environment and how others attain a mutually sustaining, although fortuitous, balance with theirs. But for the most part, he records how humans are formed in the image of their surroundings, and his governing principle becomes "I am what is around me" (CP 86). Similar to Crispin's unforeseen descent into indulgent fatalism, Stevens senses that such a theory can culminate only in environmental determinism. This philosophical dead-end, I suggested, accounts, at least in part, for his nearly decade-long silence.

When Stevens returns to poetry in the mid-1930s, he confronts the same problem but at a more abstract level. By seeing the relationship between people and place as a distinctively poetic process—"Poetry is a response to the daily necessity of getting the world right" (OP 201)—he modifies his ideas concerning the relationship with one's surroundings by translating them into an active, aesthetic mode. Recognizing that "the world about us would be desolate except for the world within us" (NA 169), he expresses the central importance of the imagination's nongeography to the world's geography. In a meditative poetry of process, he evolves the fictive hero, one that elicits a potential self within the reader and one that is capable of transforming the scene of life into a place of sustenance: "Oxidid, banal suburb" becomes "Olympia" (CP 182).

His later poetry, I maintained, presents the difficulty of achieving such a transformation of place, for "The ultimate elegance: the imagined land" (CP 250) has to be credible in the face of reality. Stevens begins by acknowledging that humans can know only a version of the world. Since ultimate reality remains beyond form, human attempts to conceptualize reality inevitably alter it: one's forms become one's fictions. However, since all anyone can ever know must be contained within a conceptual frame, one must strive to make that form credible. Fictive constructs, Stevens' poetry emphasizes, must be based on original responses to the abstract, the first idea, the image at its source. The accent throughout is on process, fluidity, change. Humans must constantly go back to fresh perceptions, "Not [to] the symbol but [to] that for which the symbol stands" (CP 238),

in order to make the symbol meaningful, credible. Thus, although the fictive *mundo* in which one lives may be false, it may be “falseness close to kin” (CP 385).

This process of creating the world in which we live becomes in Stevens the poetic process itself, the act of the mind finding what will suffice. His theory of poetry becomes no less than a theory of life. In his last phase, I noted, Stevens locates one’s true home within poetry itself, the ceaseless act of the mind, the act of intelligent humans “At the centre of the unintelligible, / As in a hermitage” (CP 495). I titled my dissertation “‘The Hermitage at the Center’: The Poetics of Place in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens.”

Now, fully three decades later, I have chosen to revisit this topic. The essays gathered in this special issue radiate in all sorts of directions, some similar to my original response, others quite divergent, but all recognize the importance of place in Stevens’ poetry. The two essays that come closest to sharing my view of Stevens’ treatment of place as an aesthetic theory are the ones by Carol Cantrell and Karen Helgeson. Cantrell sees the world and self as interactive and mutually transformative, and she detects in Stevens’ sense of place a significant meeting ground for culture and nature. She extends these theories by relating them to the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty as well as Buddhist and Native American traditions. Similar to my notion of “composition,” she senses a dynamic at work, one she calls (borrowing a term from Merleau-Ponty) “‘compossibility,’ the sum of what is and what is possible” (11). Helgeson, focusing on “The Rock,” uses the metaphor of transubstantiation to note a comparable pattern of inseparability between the self and world, an act of poetic communion that renews—in Stevens’ terminology, “cures”—both.

Robert Pack pursues the Buddhist connection by suggesting that creation emerges out of nothingness, much as the new physics theorizes about the origin of the universe. Pack maintains that in Stevens, in order for the transformative power of the imagination to begin to create, it must first destroy place: “Stevens’ point is that we do not see anything in the world accurately through our description of it, our naming of it, until we see the thing in its annihilation as well, which renders it nameless” (110). Pack uses numerous lyrics to explore this theme and ends on a detailed reading of “The Auroras of Autumn” to show nothingness as “the womb of possibility” (99).

Beehler also sees destruction as a necessary mode of capturing “living changefulness” (49) in Stevens, and he relates Stevens’ aesthetics to his contemporary Frank Lloyd Wright’s theories of architecture. Both Stevens and Wright, Beehler observes, strive to sustain vitality by “destroying the box,” to modify slightly Wright’s phrase. In his architectural poetry and in his poetic architecture, Stevens and Wright create a sense of place that both enfolds and unfolds, captures the present and the future, becomes both *rooted* and *en route*.

Two essays—one by Justin Quinn, an Irishman writing about Stevens' sense of American place and the other by Daniel Tobin, an American writing about Stevens' sense of the Irish—counter traditional views of Stevens as the great individualist in the Emersonian, self-reliant tradition. Quinn sees in Stevens' increased interest in genealogy and Pennsylvania place-names an almost Jungian archetype, in which language and lineage are vitally linked. He suggests that Stevens' mounting respect for his family and its traditions marks the way to a clearer perception of the world, one in which recognition of the past leads to change and renewal in the future.

Like Quinn, Tobin, in his examination of the Irish connection, sees forces other than an indigenous American one at work. In the motif of the journey westward from Ireland, Tobin sees a horizontal, immanent mode that intersects the vertical, American transcendentalist one and allows Stevens to remake identity based on a solid sense of place. Tobin traces this motif throughout Stevens' poetry, from the early "Blanche McCarthy" to the middle figure of the MacCollough to the late "Our Stars Come from Ireland," as well as in the correspondence with Thomas McGreevy.

Finally, Keith Manecke, in a close reading of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," takes us back full circle to the perdurable if not obdurate physical reality of a specific place. Manecke argues for a metonymic, as opposed to a metaphoric, reading of Stevens and suggests that the poem, despite its constant fluctuations between the imagined and the real, affirms, once again, the importance of a particular place in Stevens' poetics. Aware of the mediating nature of language, Stevens strives to get beyond its interference to provide a direct experience of the thing itself, so that the poem becomes "the cry of its occasion" (*CP* 473).

If this introduction began on a fateful note, it ends on one of serendipity. Out of the blue came two contributions that fit perfectly with this issue on place. In Erik La Prade's brief essay, we publish here for the first time a photograph by Charles Henri Ford of Stevens in his flower garden, a place he cherished. And when Rev. Richard Mansfield sent me Brigham Fay's drawing of Stevens' house, which has been the deanery of Christ Church Cathedral of Hartford for many years, I could think of nothing more appropriate for the cover than this illustration, surrounded as it were "in a purple light" (*CP* 226).

Clarkson University

# “A Moving Part of a Motion”: Place as *Poesis* in Stevens’ Poetry of the Earth

CAROL H. CANTRELL

*The grackles crack their throats of bone in the smooth air.*  
—“Banal Sojourn”

*The skreak and skritter of evening gone*  
*And grackles gone . . .*  
—“Autumn Refrain”

*. . . the blatter of grackles . . .*  
—“The Man on the Dump”

## I

WALLACE STEVENS’ GRACKLES join other unpoetic birds—pigeons, blackbirds, crows—in populating his poems. These commonplace birds are of little interest either to the literary critic or to the naturalist, for they are birds who thrive to the point of nuisance in everyday, ordinary human-dominated landscapes. Stevens’ fine-tuned mimicry of grackles reminds us that these birds skreak and skritter and blatter but do not warble. They are musicians of the mundane, of the kind of urban landscape mostly consisting of clouds and trees one might see when walking to work in Hartford, Connecticut, as Stevens did every day. These are the landscapes, if one can call them that, of most of Stevens’ poetry.

Yet throughout his life Stevens sustained a passionate feeling for nature, or, more properly speaking, for the earth. As a young man Stevens wrote in his journal:

One word more. I thought, on the train, how utterly we have forsaken the Earth, in the sense of excluding it from our thoughts. There are but few who consider its physical hugeness, its rough enormity. It is still a disparate monstrosity, full of solitudes + barrens + wilds. It still dwarfs + terrifies + crushes. The rivers still roar, the mountains still crash, the winds still shatter. Man is an affair of cities. His gardens + orchards + fields

are mere scrapings. Somehow, however, he has managed to shut out the face of the giant from his windows. But the giant is there, nevertheless. . . . But, as I say, we do not think of this. (*L* 73)

As he grew older Stevens' sense of the earth's importance did not diminish. At the height of his career he wrote "the great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of the earth remains to be written" (*NA* 142) and toward the end of his career wrote, with an overt passion unusual for him,

One turns with something like ferocity toward a land that one loves. . . . This is a vital affair, not an affair of the heart (as it may be in one's first poems), but an affair of the whole being (as in one's last poems), a fundamental affair of life, or, rather, an affair of fundamental life; so that one's cry of O Jerusalem becomes little by little a cry to something a little nearer and nearer until at last one cries out to a living name, a living place, a living thing, and in crying out confesses openly all the bitter secretions of experience. (*OP* 248)

Within this continuity of feeling for nature, the shift in focus is striking. Stevens' late expression of passion for place both echoes and transforms his youthful cry that humans clumped together in cities have forsaken the earth. The differences between his early and late comments are as significant as the continuity between them, for together they suggest the dimensions of Stevens' radical revisioning of the role of nature in poetry and more generally of the relationship between nature and culture. As Gyorgyi Voros argues, Stevens "reimagines the Nature/culture dialectic and seeks to reinstate the forgotten term—Nature or, to use Stevens's term, 'reality'—in that dialectic" (11).

In fact, Stevens' revisioning of nature in his mature work goes far beyond reinstating nature as a forgotten term in "the Nature/culture dialectic." Stevens' poetry challenges both humanist and environmentalist conceptions of the human/nature relationship, and this double challenge is most dramatic and subtle in his radical revisioning of place. "Place," which humans make in concert with the nonhuman, is neither nature nor culture but a particular kind of "between" space belonging in greater or lesser measure to both. Despite its importance, "place" does not count for much as an analytical tool in most humanist and posthumanist thought—we are accustomed to relegating place to the background most of the time. Yet in doing so we ignore a significant meeting ground between nature and culture, mind and world. If place is a site of making or *poesis*, it is also a site of dependency, for no embodied being can live independent of place; on the contrary, we are utterly dependent on specific features of our bodily location such as air and gravity. Just as we cannot think about the mind

without the body (as recent feminist thought has shown), so we cannot think about the embodied mind as independent of place.

That these issues are not merely academic is clear. Increasingly in environmental thought as in other movements for social change, dualistic assumptions are vigorously debated. William Cronin and others have argued that the conception of wilderness, for example, maintains a dualistic relationship between nature and culture, and environmentalists from non-Western cultures have demonstrated the illegitimacy of claims to universality of Western concepts of "nature." *Terra Nova's* special issue devoted to wilderness, for example, includes essays by Third World writers critical of the Western conception of nature and culture as mutually exclusive, arguing instead for what Pramod Parajuli calls the "'sociality of nature'" and the "'naturalness of the social'" (20). Speaking from an ecofeminist perspective, Val Plumwood argues against both a reliance on hierarchical dualisms and a blanket rejection of difference *per se*, and urges instead a "recognition of a complex, interacting pattern of both continuity and difference" (67).

Stevens' poetry of *poesis* anticipates this struggle to re-vision the old nature/culture dialectic and is in turn illuminated by it. His poetry also has something to contribute to the debate. His exploration of the activities of the imagination is an exploration of the human activity of making, of humans building a world, and much of his work offers ways of thinking about humans as makers in an ongoing relation with a more-than-human world. A key word here is "ongoing," for Stevens so consistently treats place as process that his poetry is only minimally about "place" as it is usually represented—place as scenic, as enduring landmark or stable background, as nostalgic memory. His poems register a passion toward place in unconventional ways; they give us few place names, little of the scenic, and nothing of the sublime, and they always register the activities of what he calls "the most august imagination" (*OP* 135). Stevens' "poem of the earth" is a poem that challenges the division between the human and the natural represented by his early image of the giant of nature standing outside the house of the human.

Stevens' poetry transmutes his early apprehension of nature as outside, separate, and other into a long meditation on relationality as process and on human making—*poesis*—as intrinsic to human relatedness to place. The late philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty is useful in elucidating these aspects of Stevens' poetry of place, especially as Merleau-Ponty has been employed in recent work in environmental and feminist philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Two non-Western traditions that conceptualize place nondualistically, Taoism and recent Native American writing, amplify this understanding. The first of these contexts, Taoism, resonates with Stevens' emphasis on the weave between consciousness and world. The second of these, recent Native American writing, is less familiar but is at least as significant for its understanding of the interlace between nature and culture.

## II

*The earth is not a building but a body.*

—Wallace Stevens

*Why would not the synergy exist among different organisms, if it is possible within each?*

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty

The work of the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty begins with a rejection of dualistic understandings of mind and body, self and world, and starts instead from sensuous experience. Particularly in his last unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty is arguably a philosopher of the earth in much the same way that Stevens is a poet of the earth. Despite their differences—Stevens was born in 1879, Merleau-Ponty in 1908; Stevens is elusive and inconsistent, Merleau-Ponty, elusive and systematic; Stevens' poems seem to be bodiless while Merleau-Ponty's work culminates in his concept of "the flesh"—their similarities are striking. Placing Stevens in apposition to Merleau-Ponty discloses the extent to which his work redefines the human relationship to place.<sup>2</sup>

Stevens shares with Merleau-Ponty a sense of human life and thought as continuous with "the inhuman more, / The still inhuman more" (*OP* 131). For Merleau-Ponty, "the world is made of the same stuff as the body," and perception, vision no less than touch, "happens among, or is caught up in, things" ("Eye and Mind" 256); similarly for Stevens, vision is "A sharing of color and being part of it" (*CP* 518). At the same time, both Stevens and Merleau-Ponty emphasize that perception is dialogic, both within and between selves; the intertwinings of sight and memory, perception and language, vision and emotion, visible and invisible—what Stevens calls the inevitable presence of "What we know in what we see, what we feel in what / We hear" (*CP* 518)—are echoed by Merleau-Ponty's chiasmic crisscrossings between visible and invisible that constitute perception.

For both Stevens and Merleau-Ponty the "inhuman more" is nontranscendental—this world is all there is; there is no beyond, no transcending of the temporal. On the contrary, for both philosopher and poet, the world is immersed within time. Indeed, the "transformation of a spatial object into a temporal event is for Stevens the axis on which poetry turns" (Vendler 7) and for Merleau-Ponty, "nothing exists absolutely, and it would, indeed, be more accurate to say that nothing exists and that everything is 'temporalized' " (*PP* 332). Perception and thought alike arise within webs of constantly changing relationships; reality can never be anything but emergent. Even more, the reality comprised by multiple relationships between body and mind continually opens into myriad possibilities. In Merleau-Ponty's words,

it is the same world that contains our bodies and our minds, provided that we understand by world not only the sum of things that fall or could fall under our eyes, but also the locus of their compossibility. . . . (VI 13)

The transformative potential of what Merleau-Ponty calls “compossibility,” the sum of what is and what is possible, is suggested also by Stevens’ adage, “Reality is not what it is. It consists of the many realities which it can be made into” (OP 202). Compossibility springs from the arc of relationships in process within and between “selves”: Merleau-Ponty asks, “Why would not the synergy exist among different organisms, if it is possible within each?” and implies that synergy—the flux of change and exchange and even possibility itself—is the stuff of reality (VI 142). For Stevens, “Poetry is not the same thing as the imagination taken alone. Nothing is itself taken alone. Things are because of interrelations or interactions” (OP 189). The “stuff as the world” is thus “an intertwining or enlacing open system of transformation” (Mazis, “Chaos” 235).

Thus, for Stevens as for Merleau-Ponty, nothing is stable, a thing in and of itself—not landscape or place, not “selves,” not difference, not language. Both Merleau-Ponty and Stevens use language to challenge the illusion of stability that language manages to impose on a fluttering and fluttering world—Merleau-Ponty’s densely metaphorical style especially in his last work incorporates metamorphosis as part of the texture of argument,<sup>3</sup> and when Stevens uses names they caricature the act of naming (Canon Aspirin, Nanzia Nunzio, Bawda, St. John and the Back-Ache, Professor Eucalyptus, for example). In Stevens’ poetry, more complex human consciousness is nameless. Stevens’ places are virtually always nameless as well, his subtle attack on the illusion of permanence suggested by place names. Instead, he represents place as process—as clouds, wind, and weather, as light and shadow, as season and time of day. Clouds, wind, and weather are quotidian demonstrations of Stevens’ aphorism, “The world is a force, not a presence” (OP 198).

Stevens shares with Merleau-Ponty an insistence that we experience the solidity of the tactile world and the fluidity of the visual world as aspects of each other, that process has texture and motion has weight. Even the sense of sight, associated in our philosophical tradition with a detached observation of “‘solid, static objects extended in space’ ” (NA 25), is caught up in the tactile. In Merleau-Ponty’s words:

We must habituate ourselves to think that every visible is cut out in the tangible, every tactile being in some manner promised to visibility, and that there is encroachment, infringement, not only between the touched and the touching, but also between the tangible and the visible, which is *encrusted* in it. . . . (VI 134; my emphasis)

Stevens uses the same metaphor to suggest the materiality of the visible and to imply the intertwining of the senses of sight and touch: "Light, too, encrusts us making visible / The motions of the mind" (CP 137; my emphasis).

Even more significantly, the "motions of the mind" and sense experience are mutually enabling, even mutually contingent, for both Stevens and Merleau-Ponty, and both are intrigued by the common ground between poet and philosopher this connection opens up. Particularly in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty grapples with his difficulty as a philosopher in exploring nondualistic relations between perception and conception:

We touch here the most difficult point, that is, the bond between the flesh and the idea, between the visible and the interior armature which it manifests and which it conceals. No one has gone further than Proust in fixing the relations between the visible and the invisible, in describing *an idea that is not the contrary of the sensible, that is its lining and its depth*. (VI 149; my emphasis)

This passage is an apt description of Stevens' focus on ideas that "are not the contrary of the sensible." "Sense," one of Stevens' favorite words, unites two meanings usually opposed in English: sense perception and rationality. "Sense" treats perception, experience, and judgment as a single thing and captures the fluidity of the continuously changing interconnections between "the visible and the invisible," between perception and conception, feeling and logic, memory and language. "What is the poet's subject?" Stevens asks; "It is his sense of the world" (NA 121). And again: "Weather is a sense of nature. Poetry is a sense" (OP 187). Stevens' "sense" offers an alternative to dualistic divisions between mind and matter; poetry as "a sense" offers the reader varieties of nondualistic experience.

"The Curtains in the House of the Metaphysician" is a good example of Stevens' revolutionary poetry of world as force, place as process. In this poem, the metaphysician's constructions of stable truth dwindle to the tiny and temporary when seen in the context of blowing curtains. The metaphysician inhabits a house with curtains whose drift tethers him to a shape-shifting mundane. The "long motions" of the curtains, which are "as clouds / Inseparable from their afternoons," gesture toward the continuity of billowing curtains with clouds and afternoons, all things revealed as processes, processes as things. Curtains and clouds are visible indicators of change and offer a glimpse of the invisible dimension of time; such ephemeral landmarks provide a glimpse of the local as a moment in space-time. The motions of time and change extend far beyond the small house of the human into the cosmos. With a breathtaking swiftness, Stevens' short poem moves through the "changing of light" into the wheeling night sky

in which all motion  
Is beyond us, as the firmament,  
Up-rising and down-falling, bares  
The last largeness, bold to see. (CP 62)

“The Curtains in the House of the Metaphysician” in its very brevity demonstrates how the “life that is lived in the scene that it composes” (NA 25) opens onto the “inhuman more” with which it is continuous. Even “the last largeness” opens back to the perceiver as it dwarfs her. Indeed, the phrase “bold to see” returns us ambiguously both to the human perceiver and to the startling possibility that the firmament is looking back at us.

This reciprocal gaze—and its disabling perspective on the dualistic divisions between consciousness and matter, culture, and nature, on which the house of the Western metaphysician is built—is remarkably resonant of one of the most difficult and important aspects of Merleau-Ponty’s late thought, his concepts of reciprocity and reversibility. For Merleau-Ponty, perception is born out of the “reversibility of the seeing and the visible” at the point “where the two metamorphoses cross” (VI 154). The seer has a double-sided presence in the world as both subject and object, seer and seen, and indeed the metaphysician in Stevens’ poem has this double relation to the cosmos. Reversibility for Merleau-Ponty generates what he calls the “Flesh of the world”; it

means that my body is made of the same flesh as the world (it is a perceived), and moreover that this flesh of my body is shared by the world, the world *reflects* it, encroaches upon it and it encroaches upon the world. . . . (VI 248)

With his image of “The last largeness, bold to see,” Stevens transforms his image of the giant at the windows into something far more reciprocal and relational without erasing the gulf between seer and seen or the otherness of the gaze of the “inhuman more.” Metaphysician, curtains, and cosmos share a world, encroach upon one another, reflect one another, “inter-are” (95)—Thich Nhat Hanh’s suggestive word—through difference.

### III

*It is the third commonness with light and air,  
A curriculum, a vigor, a local abstraction . . .  
Call it, once more, a river, an unnamed flowing. . . .*  
—“The River of Rivers in Connecticut”

*All tricksters like to hang around the doorway. . . .*  
—Lewis Hyde

Stevens' poetry is full of references to windows, portals, porches, foyers, and other transitional, often liminal, places. Once one looks for such transitional spaces or moments, they appear to be potentially anywhere, in a glass of water, for example, or in a heartbeat. Sometimes these are moments when the human ear seems to have access to nonhuman speech, as when "The miff-maff-muff of water, the vocables / Of the wind" are continuous with "the glassily-sparkling particles / Of the mind" (CP 423). At other times, the mind seems to have access to itself, sometimes to "the thing itself" (CP 534), sometimes to a sense of "an order, a whole" (CP 524).

Stevens' poetry provides an entry into a kind of experience and meta-experience mostly marginal within Western culture—that is, direct experience of the mind as participatory in the inhuman more. Stevens' portals open into secular, nontranscendental versions of sacred places—the portal into, which leads to "the nothing" and reframes experience, and the portal out of, which leads into the numinous real and to the acts of human creation associated with it. Described in this way, Stevens' poetry has affinities with two non-Western "wisdom traditions," to use Charlene Spretnak's useful phrase. One of these, as many Stevens critics have noted, is the wisdom tradition of Buddhist thought; the second, that of indigenous American people. The first of these, the Buddhist tradition, imagines place as continuous with consciousness; the second of these, the Native American tradition, imagines place as continuous with community. Like that of some other twentieth-century artists, Stevens' relationship with Buddhism was not only, and probably not even mainly, intellectual. Indeed, it appears that Stevens engaged in a poet's meditative practice in the tradition of "walking meditation." Stevens walked the two miles to and from work every day, and as he walked he composed poems.<sup>4</sup> Each day this routine functioned as a kind of meditation in and through the elements of an untethered mind, place, and language. His poems record traces of these walks thematically—e.g., "Perhaps / The truth depends on a walk around a lake" (CP 386)—but also, and more deeply, in their way of proceeding.

Many of Stevens' long poems can be described in the same terms as a walking meditation, as "the coming and going of feelings, . . . the awareness of thought moments," and their movement from emergence to disappearance, for which "one has to be extremely alert, with a sharpened awareness" (Boyd 9). Stevens' disciplined, rather monastic life provided conditions conducive to attentiveness, its sheer repetitiousness an opportunity for awareness of awareness, awareness of the motion of thoughts and feelings as they come and go. Stevens' shorter poems share the generative succession of phrases characteristic of the long poems, but only up to a point, for they are little jolts to awareness reminiscent of the *koan*, often opening to a mind/place dialogic. In "Hibiscus on the Sleeping Shores," the first small jolt is that "The mind roamed as a moth roams"—

a comically apt comparison of one seemingly aimless movement to another. This moth roams within a world of white noise, in a state of unawareness of “whatever noise the motions of the waves / Made on the sea-weeds and the covered stones.” Against this indifference something stirs: a “monstered moth”—a meta-moth?—begins to wake, and as it does the color and sound of the scene differentiate and intensify:

Then it was that that monstered moth  
Which had lain folded against the blue  
And the colored purple of the lazy sea,

And which had drowsed along the bony shores,  
Shut to the blather that the water made,  
Rose up besprent and sought the flaming red

Dabbled with yellow pollen—red as red  
As the flag above the old café—  
And roamed there all the stupid afternoon. (*CP* 22–23)

The unhurried, irregular roaming progress of this moth, of this poem, meanders toward the hibiscus “Dabbled with yellow pollen”—toward the “red as red”—and there the poem ends, with the roaming, inconclusive, “stupid” drift of awakening, of emergent perception.

Yet for all its affinities with Taoism, Stevens’ poetry is more turbulent. Ynhui Park describes Merleau-Pontian Being as “closer to the Taoist’s Being than to any other Western conception of Being,” but adds that although the experience of the Tao is “comparable to a serene and simple Japanese melody,” the experience of Merleau-Pontian Being is “a vortex in depth on its layers, levels, articulations” (319). Nowhere is this dynamic layering more apparent in Stevens than in his use of language. Though Stevens uses language itself to un-name the world, a move compatible with Taoism (and with Merleau-Ponty [see Park 322]), for Stevens language itself is always a dynamic participant in the real. “Poetry is the gaiety (joy) of language,” Stevens writes (*OP* 199), and his wily language, his “monstered” moth and “blather[ing]” water, frequently and exuberantly claim the foreground. Its very exuberance takes away what language supposedly gives us—a solid world, the world we use language to pin in place with names.

The poem “The Glass of Water” is a case in point. The glass, a place of sorts, “would melt in heat,” and the water, which “would freeze in cold,” is an object lesson in the fluidity of objects and their susceptibility to language as play: a glass of water is “merely a state, / One of many, between two poles.” This poem’s deft reminders of the secret life of objects—glass as liquid, water as solid, a glass of water as trickster—enact what Donna Haraway calls “[a]cknowledging the agency of the world [which] . . . makes room for some unsettling possibilities, including a sense of the world’s

independent sense of humour" (199). What Stevens shows us is that a glass of water is a wonderful joke on us, that "when we give up mastery but keep searching for fidelity," in Haraway's words, we find that we live in a trickster world "knowing all the while we will be hoodwinked" (199).

Nor are objects the only shape-changers. The poem goes on to transform the glass of water once more, this time highlighting the trickster potential within language as well. The metaphor describing the glass of water metamorphoses it into a place of sorts, a watering hole, where

Light  
Is the lion that comes down to drink. There  
And in that state, the glass is a pool.  
Ruddy are his eyes and ruddy are his claws  
When light comes down to wet his frothy jaws. . . .  
(CP 197)

The sun does indeed "drink" water through evaporation, and in this instance what Merleau-Ponty calls the "bond between the flesh and the idea" leads toward language's autonomy, its freedom from the literal. Language itself is another trickster in the scene, "A moving part of a motion" (CP 518). It is in the world and of the world and yet has a life of its own. It is neither a part of nature nor separate from it; again, Merleau-Ponty's comments are illuminating:

Far from harboring the secret of the being of the world, language is itself a world, itself a being—a world and a being to the second power, since it does not speak in a vacuum, since it speaks *of* being and *of* the world and therefore redoubles their enigma instead of dissipating it. (VI 96)

Indeed, for Stevens as well as Merleau-Ponty, language is not the chief antagonist over and against the world but a force within it. "Poetry Is a Destructive Force" Stevens asserts in the title of another of his short poems, which ends, "It can kill a man." The poem's bald beginning assertion, "That's what misery is, / Nothing to have at heart," is immediately embodied: "nothing" becomes something, that is, "a thing to have," while the heart with its burden becomes externalized and metamorphosed as "A lion, an ox in his breast." The lion(heart), in turn, is called by name in Spanish, "Corazon," and then transformed by other names into "stout dog, / Young ox, bow-legged bear." This animal—the nothing, the heart, poetry—within the human body is experienced as some Other inhabiting the self; one "feel[s] it breathing there" and "tastes its blood, not spit" (CP 192). And then with no warning it is as though the self is inside the Other:

He is like a man  
In the body of a violent beast.  
Its muscles are its own . . . (CP 193)

The poem ends with the lion “sleep[ing] in the sun. / Its nose is on its paws.” If it can kill a man, as the last line says, this may be because misery can kill, and it may be because poetry is a trickster too, fixing and unfixing boundaries, making a linguistic game of it, eating the world and being eaten by it.

IV

*The Boat People turned the world upside down and now,  
five centuries later, we are all native and all Boat People.*  
—Jackalope

*Those that are left are the unaccomplished,  
The finally human,  
Natives of a dwindled sphere.*  
—“Lebensweisheitspielerei”

Stevens’ emphasis on language as a force in the world aligns him with a parallel movement in American literature—that is, the emerging tradition of twentieth-century Native American writing grounded at least in part in an oral tradition. For Stevens no less than for Native American writers, stories (or “fictions,” Stevens’ word) make the world and arise from it. Though present-day Native American writers have a complex connection to oral traditions and the written word, they emphasize again and again that their work, like the poems and stories of oral tradition, arises out of the land. “Speaking for the sake of the land and the people means speaking for the inextricable relationship and interconnection between them,” Simon Ortiz writes in his introduction to a collection of essays by a new generation of Native American writers.

If anything is most vital, essential, and absolutely important in Native cultural philosophy, it is this concept of interdependence: the fact that without land there is no life. . . . (xii)

Stevens writes, of course, out of a very different cultural and literary tradition. He writes, as a Native American writer would not, “Life is an affair of people not of places. But for me life is an affair of places *and that is the trouble*” (OP 185; my emphasis). Reading Stevens’ poetry over and against a poetry that values the land as it values the people foregrounds a particular aspect of the central but complex role of place in Stevens’ work, the sense of *not* being native, and this sense of disconnection is where his poetry begins:

From this the poem springs: that we live in a place  
That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves. . . .  
(CP 383)

This disconnection is compounded by the historical moment in Anglo-European culture of "see[ing] the gods dispelled in mid-air and dissolve like clouds," an experience that leaves the "increasingly human self" dispossessed, "alone in a solitude" (OP 260). Though Stevens takes his relationship to the history of poetry written in English for granted as Native writers cannot, he also writes for "the people" of his culture, and the "we" to which he so often refers constantly returns to a starting point of poverty, the indigence of the "finally human." "We" are natives, but "we" are "Natives of a dwindled sphere" (CP 504).

In Stevens' early, somewhat autobiographical, poem, "The Comedian as the Letter C," the starting point is "The World without Imagination," a world built on the principle enunciated in the first line: "Nota: man is the intelligence of his soil" (CP 27), and the poem slowly moves to reverse this principle of Western thought by establishing a colony in a "still new continent": "Nota: his soil is man's intelligence. / That's better" (CP 37, 36). But the strained language of "Comedian" suggests that colonizing the exotic does not link the native of a dwindled sphere with the earth. One of Stevens' earliest efforts to appropriate a "native" language is the passage in "Sunday Morning" that reads "Supple and turbulent, a ring of men / Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn" (CP 69). His later poetry is increasingly grounded not in the exotic but in the poverty and ignorance of dislocation itself:

You must become an ignorant man again  
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye  
And see it clearly in the idea of it. (CP 380)

What sort of poetry can a native of a dwindled sphere properly write? For Stevens, it will be at most a "supreme fiction" with no claims to transcendence. At the same time, it will be grounded in something outside itself; Stevens' poetry, like Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, begins from and returns to the human experience of the physical world, as his epigraph from Mario Rossi suggests: "*air and light, the joy of having a body, the voluptuousness of looking*" (CP 136). Without a sacred dimension behind these basic elements of air and light, the poetry of the dwindled sphere is a poetry of poverty, of the merely human. At the same time, the constitutive powers of perception and language mean that it is not just a poetry about itself. Indeed, the very poverty of Stevens' poetry opens the possibility of a non-nostalgic connectedness to the land and between generations. This connectedness is somewhat akin to Gerald Vizenor's notion of "soverance" in rejecting "the romance of an aesthetic absence," the nostalgia of a lost

past; instead, soverance is a “sense of presence in remembrance” (15). In Stevens’ indigent world there is no authentic or originary past, but our sense of the world is itself an ongoing remembrance. Those before us have left us the intangible tangible of “The look of things,” of “what we felt / At what we saw”; all this becomes “A part of what . . . is” (CP 159).

How “what we felt / At what we saw” becomes “part of what . . . is”—in Merleau-Ponty’s language, the “transition from the mute world to the speaking world” (VI 154)—is the strongest link between Stevens’ work and Native American writing, between what Stevens calls fictions and oral traditions call stories. Trinh Minh-ha has shown that oral traditions have a number of elements that seem surprisingly postmodern: language is constitutive; reality is malleable; and power inheres not in individuals but in stories and discourse. In much postmodern theory these ideas are played out in a textualized universe. In oral traditions, in Trinh’s account, stories are potentially more than mere “mind transmission”; rather, “speech is seen, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched” (126). Language arises from the sensuous experience of the world and is a force within that experience: “Speech is the materialization, externalization, and internalization of the vibrations of forces” (127), a passage that echoes Merleau-Ponty’s comment that we are “sonorous beings for others and for ourselves” (VI 155). In Native American writing, and, I am arguing, in Stevens’ poetry, language and world are interactive and mutually transformative.

Text and world are constantly made and unmade through the “bond of coming and going,” the movement “to and fro” enabled by in-between space (Trinh 128). For Luci Tapahonso and other Native American writers, such an enabling space is the sacred “surround,” so to speak, through which humans are related to other beings.

Before this world existed, the holy people made themselves  
visible  
by becoming the clouds, sun, moon, trees, bodies of water,  
thunder,  
rain, snow, and other aspects of this world we live in. That  
way,  
they said, we would never be alone. So it is possible to talk to  
them. . . . (Tapahonso 19)

In a secular culture, a vestige of this sacred space fleetingly remains in what Walter Benjamin calls the “aura,” an apparition produced by the expectation that “our look will be returned by the object of our gaze” (“Baudelaire” 188). The “aura” is a vital space between ourselves and a responsive other, whether living or inanimate, and produces the “unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be” (“Reproduction” 222). In an age of mechanical reproduction, uniqueness collapses with the loss of a vital space between self and world.

Faced with this loss, Stevens and others explore the possibilities of a non-mythic aura in their art by drawing on Eastern aesthetic traditions. Chinese landscape painting, as Zhaoming Qian points out, offers the example of a fully developed aesthetic that opens the possibility that “the image has turned the table on us and changed us also into the gazer/object who at once gazes and is gazed at” (137). Writing about the paintings of Barnett Newman, Georges Didi-Huberman shows how Newman’s work orients the viewer to the present moment of the painting through the physical space it shares with the viewer. Newman’s paintings, he argues, create the “ ‘apparition’ . . . [of] a *distance*” through a foregrounding “of breath, of the air that surrounds us as a subtle, moving, absolute place, the air that permeates us and makes us breathe” (Didi-Huberman 60).

Likewise, Stevens’ poetry is lined with “betweens,” with gaps, spaces, and breathing room, both as theme and technique. “Stevens increasingly came to rely on similes and the related form ‘as if’ ” in his poetry, as Jacqueline Brogan has shown; using these figures, she argues, “not only exposes the gap that metaphor tends to conceal and that fragmentation tends to exaggerate, and that not only exposes the inter-relation of these two processes of language, but also speaks as a *sound* of silence” (125, 143). Without such breathing room, such “*sound* of silence” between and around, “Each person completely touches us / With what he is and as he is” (CP 505). Moreover, as Brogan argues, the “silent threshold” out of which language arises, the transition from what Merleau-Ponty calls the “mute world” to the speaking world, is represented by the “silent threshold” of the simile (143). For Stevens even the natives of a dwindled sphere can experience a living “surround” that connects as it divides them from the rest of the universe. This experience of such a “surround” is described memorably as the “river of rivers in Connecticut” in his poem of the same name:

It is the third commonness with light and air,  
A curriculum, a vigor, a local abstraction . . .  
Call it, once more, a river, an unnamed flowing,

Space-filled. . . (CP 533)

Stevens’ limits, as measured by the work of the Navajo writer Luci Tapahonso, are manifest. He cannot greet the trees and animals as relatives whose stories he can recite, and he does not traverse the gap between text and body as Tapahonso seems to do with effortless ease:

Within us, as we breathe,  
are the light breezes that cool a summer afternoon,  
within us the tumbling winds that precede rain,  
.....  
To see this, blow on your hand now. (19)

Instead, Stevens' poems explore the weave between self and world at the meta-level; instead of writing poems about breathing or cooking, he writes poems about reading.

One of the most important of these is entitled, remarkably, "Large Red Man Reading." The mysterious Red Man is suggestive both of the Native American and of the written tradition, "read" texts. The Large Red Man is a storyteller of sorts; his reading aloud is a liminal activity at the threshold between text and life, the abstract and the embodied. This poem begins:

There were ghosts that returned to earth to hear his phrases,  
As he sat there reading, aloud, the great blue tabulae.  
They were those from the wilderness of stars that had  
expected more. (CP 423)

This mysterious beginning, with its ghosts and its focus on the "great blue tabulae," defamiliarizes—even, we could say, de-secularizes—the act of reading. Indeed, the "great blue tabulae" are a kind of sacred text; they are in fact "the poem of life." In contrast, the listeners are "ghosts" exiled to a *sense-less* space devoid of feeling:

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. . . . (CP 423–24)

And when the Large Red Man reads from the poem of life, he reads the text of the quotidian, "Of the pans above the stove, the pots on the table, the tulips among them," a text that nonetheless contains "The outlines of being and its expressings, the syllables of its law." This reading is transformative: the "great blue tabulae"—now purple in the union between red and blue, between speaker and listener—reveal

The outlines of being and its expressings, the syllables of its  
law:  
*Poesis, poesis*, the literal characters, the vatic lines. . . .

And as the audience listens, the "outlines of being" are enfleshed, for

in those thin, those spended hearts, [the outlines of being]  
Took on color, took on shape and the size of things as they are  
And spoke the feeling for them, which was what they had  
lacked. (CP 424)

"They" who had lacked color, shape, and size refers back both to ghosts and to "things as they are"; this weighty pronoun here suggests that things no less than people are lifeless without such a union between thought and feeling, words and body.

This union—between speaker and listeners, speech and text, spirit and world, feeling and awareness—is generated through *poesis*—through poetry, and more generally "making," "creation." The ghosts would have "shivered," "run fingers over leaves / And against the most coiled thorn" and "step[ed] barefoot into reality" through the offices of reading, of poetry, of shared language. Reading from the "great blue tabulae," an artifact with a human cultural history, enables rather than undermines immediate sense experience. Indeed, "Large Red Man Reading" suggests that *poesis* turns disembodied spirits into experiencing subjects and space into place.

V

*A definition of language is always, implicitly or explicitly,  
a definition of human beings in the world.*

—Raymond Williams

*Language is a life, is our life and the life of the things.*

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Stevens' exploration of *poesis* as dialogic challenges any easy dichotomy between language and world, the built environment and the natural environment, and, by implication, between the human activity of making and reality. Raymond Williams has written:

The exclusion of activity, of making, from the category of "objective reality" left it contemplated only by "subjects," who might in one version be ignored in the observation of objective reality. . . . Language here decisively lost its definition as *constitutive* activity. (32)

At a time when the constitutive activity of human making threatens the very survival of the earth, it has been all too easy to see all human construction, including language, as inherently violent. But "Large Red Man Reading" implies instead that language is not only and certainly not essentially oppositional. Reading from the "great blue tabulae" produces not division but a "making sentient of the external world" in Elaine Scarry's phrase (281). Indeed, when the sky in "A Postcard from the Volcano" "Cries out a literate despair," it cries out as a phenomenon simultaneously natural and cultural, for "what we said . . . became / A part of what it is." The sky we see as we see it becomes part of the changing *always already* we leave to our heirs:

We left much more, left what still is

The look of things, left what we felt  
At what we saw. (CP 159)

Even in a culture impoverished by the absence of gods, the possibility that “what we felt / At what we saw” becomes a cultural inheritance, becomes “The look of things.” This constitutive potential within the human relationship to place links Native American writing and Stevens’ work.

In his late work, Merleau-Ponty also grapples with the relationship of language to what is outside of language and develops the notion that language itself, like perception, is a process of reciprocal exchange between self and world:

When the silent vision falls into speech, and when the speech in turn, opening up a field of the nameable and the sayable, inscribes itself in that field, in its place, according to its truth . . . this is always in virtue of the same fundamental phenomenon of reversibility which sustains both the mute perception and the speech and which manifests itself by an almost carnal existence of the idea, as well as by a sublimation of the flesh. (VI 154–55)

As recent commentators on his work have stressed, Merleau-Ponty’s principle of reversibility orients it toward time, that is, toward history. Glen Mazis points out that we tend to think of reversibility, perceiving while being a perceived, in spatial terms, within Cartesian space. But “[r]eversibility is an achievement within time,” occurring “within the becoming of perception, thought, and speech” (“Backward Flow” 56). Thus the condition of living in time opens into, rather than merely foreclosing, possibility: “the perceiving subject undergoes a continued birth; at each instant it is something new” (Merleau-Ponty, “Unpublished Text” 370).

For Merleau-Ponty and, I would argue, for Stevens as well, “to participate in history in this way is to be drawn into a gesture which allows a meaning to be born, creates possibilities, and, by making the present a turning point, opens up a future and changes the meaning of the past” (Godway 165). Being drawn into such a possibility-creating gesture, as Eleanor Godway points out, links expression and praxis, and, she argues, it is what makes politics possible. Stevens’ celebration of the rise and fall of structures of imagination, his insistence that “Poetry constantly requires a new relation” (OP 202) likewise revises history as compossibility rather than completed narrative. In this sense Stevens’ poetics authorizes political change.

As Justin Quinn has recently argued, Stevens’ engagement with weather and physical pleasure—the enjoyment of “ ‘the unphilosophical reali-

ties' "—makes his work "suspiciously ahistorical." Yet it is in the "great amphitheater of air and light," he argues, that Stevens finds a space to think about politics and ideology (53). For Quinn, Stevens uses landscape not to withdraw from history and ideology but rather to find "better ways of thinking about ideology" (63), ones that create a new sublime "that reveals nature as polyvalent, the ground from which many different interpretive possibilities spring, and these have implications for the way communities figure themselves in their cultural works" (69).

Stevens' poetry does indeed suggest that nature is the ground of "many . . . interpretive possibilities" as the parallels between his work and that of Merleau-Ponty suggest. But Stevens' meditations on humans and place go beyond an understanding of landscape as a space in which contemplation is facilitated. "Landscape" in this sense connotes a backdrop to human activities or an escape from them. Stevens' poetry is more radical than this account implies. His is a poetry not of landscape but of place, a more homely word that does not privilege a particular kind of scene and that signifies an interdependence between humans and world. Indeed, places are not timeless but temporal and visibly change as we live in them, admire them, or exploit them. "Place" includes those less-than-scenic sites populated by humans and by birds like grackles and crows. Such places, no less than the wildernesses they threaten, record and participate in an ongoing making that we do in concert with the physical world, and in this sense places are among our most essential activities of *poesis*.

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#### Notes

Many thanks to my colleagues Reid Gomez and Jim Boyd for sharing their expertise and friendship.

<sup>1</sup> The case for using Merleau-Ponty as a framework for environmental thought has been argued most forcefully by David Abram. Elizabeth Grosz has been a leading exponent of the relevance of Merleau-Ponty's late work to feminist thought.

<sup>2</sup> Though my focus is exclusively on Merleau-Ponty, with a strong emphasis on his late work, other critics have placed Stevens in a larger tradition of phenomenology. Most recently, Gyorgyi Voros has suggested, "One way to frame Stevens's contribution to modern poetry is to say that he moved from the romantic to the phenomenological" (11), employing the term in a general sense. In "Wallace Stevens as Phenomenologist," James S. Leonard and Christine E. Wharton have produced a detailed analysis of the uses and limits of Heidegger and Husserl in relation to Stevens, arguing that the "aesthetically oriented phenomenology" of Ernst Cassirer is a more productive context (331). In *The Fluent Mundo*, they refer briefly to Merleau-Ponty's essay "Eye and Mind," but do not develop the possibilities of the "parallel" they note (191, n 34).

<sup>3</sup> For an extensive analysis of Merleau-Ponty's use of metaphor in his last works, see Jerry H. Gill.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, *Letters* 272. Glen MacLeod reports that on June 26, 2000, Stevens' daily route to and from his office was proclaimed the Wallace Stevens Walk by the

Hartford City Council. This route is traced on the Web site <[www.wesleyan.edu/wstevens/Wallywalk.html](http://www.wesleyan.edu/wstevens/Wallywalk.html)>. See "News and Comments," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 24.2 (Fall 2000): 228.

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## The Westwardness of Everything: Irishness in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens

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IN HIS CLASSIC ESSAY "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" Wallace Stevens argues that in a world in which religious belief has declined the poet must "give[] to life the supreme fictions" without which the world itself is unable to be conceived (*NA* 31). In linking the poet's imaginative work to what was once the work of religion, Stevens reiterates the same concern posed by W. B. Yeats at the turn of the century: "How can the arts overcome the slow dying of men's hearts that we call the progress of the world . . . without becoming the garment of religion as in old times?" (*Essays* 162–63). Yet Stevens' reiteration of Yeats's formative insight does more than merely demonstrate an imaginative continuity between two poets' definitions of reality. While a similar "rage for order" shapes each poet's idiosyncratic vision, Stevens' use of Ireland as a metaphor in certain key poems places Ireland and Irishness at the center of the great American poet's conception of the imagination as the ordering principle of reality and, as such, of human consciousness. Though few, Stevens' "Irish poems" introduce "Irishness" as a trope for the elemental origin of reality in material forms and, ultimately, as the prototype for the "emigrant" nature of the human imagination. In these poems, the figure of the West in Irish myth and literature comes to resonate with the American myth of westwardness, and so these emblems of a prior culture find a new and unexpected incarnation in Stevens' work.

From the perspective of what might be called Stevens' Irish poems, it seems a portentous coincidence that in 1900 he published his first poem, exclusive of those in Harvard student periodicals, in the New York magazine *East and West* (Longenbach 14). Stevens' lifelong obsession with directionality, with compassing the human quest for meaning inside the charmed horizons of our earthly lives, appears nascent here. "How content I shall be in the North to which I sail" (*CP* 117), Stevens writes in "Farewell to Florida." Though in that early poem he prefers the prospect of a leafless North as sullen cure to his "sepulchral South," his imagination forever shuttles between the antipodes. Likewise, in "The Comedian as the Letter C," Crispin's neo-romantic travelogue from the world without imagination westward to the Yucatan, then back east to a Carolina of

his own invention, charts a journey in which the hero embarks on a search for a habitable world. Neither origin nor end, brute reality nor pure imagination, is sufficient to the mind's desire to live fruitfully "as and where we live" (*CP* 326). Pound's Mauberley drifting to oblivion on his hedonist's Sargasso; Shelley's Alastor sailing into the nothing of his own visionary fervor—these are the prototypical fates Crispin would avert. Instead, through his voyage, Stevens' "affectionate emigrant" comes nearer to Yeats's Oisín, "a man made vivid by the sea" (*CP* 32, 30), who exists not only in the tradition of the nineteenth-century wanderer, but also as a figure we can navigate to much earlier literary legacies (Bloom 70, 115 ff.).

"There is a human loneliness, / A part of space and solitude," Stevens' Ulysses reminds us, which is "The inner direction on which we depend" (*OP* 126–27). In charting that inner direction, Stevens' work seeks to align itself not only with the horizontal axis by which his voyager orients himself on the scale of earth, but also with the vertical axis through which poetry might become "a transcendent analogue composed of the particulars of reality, created by the poet's sense of the world" (*NA* 130). "Blanche McCarthy," the poem that Holly Stevens placed second to open *The Palm at the End of the Mind*—despite her father's judgment that it was unworthy of inclusion in *Harmonium* (Bloom 20)—elaborates its subject by using the trope of the journey to steer the gaze of the self away from the horizontal plane so it can focus itself anew on a vertical horizon:

Look in the terrible mirror of the sky  
 And not in this dead glass, which can reflect  
 Only the surfaces—the bending arm,  
 The leaning shoulder and the searching eye.  
 .....  
 See how the absent moon waits in a glade  
 Of your dark self, and how the wings of stars,  
 Upward, from unimagined coverts, fly. (*OP* 17)

Bending arm, leaning shoulder, searching eye—these are the gestic tropes of the quest, the quest that will inevitably require the self to turn away from the surfaces, and so turn the searching eye upward. The transposition of the principal verbs of the first stanza—to bend, to lean, to search—into the second stanza mark the literal transfiguration of the quest from an errant passage through the immanent realm of appearances into a visionary journey toward the unimagined, a region that can be traversed only through imagination: such is the significance of the absent moon waiting in the glade for the dark self. Is Blanche McCarthy the speaker of the injunction, or the self to whom these words are spoken? She is both, she is "Blanche," white, the primary self, a figure for Coleridge's primary imagination, the power of the divine endowed to all, the aspect of the imagination that Stevens would eventually claim is "part of the structure of reality"

(NA 81). She is therefore Blanche who must search into the dark of what lies beyond her superficial self, an inherently religious activity that brings one to the prospect of symbols descending and the glare of revelation.

It was appropriate for Holly Stevens to place “Blanche McCarthy” near the beginning of Stevens’ selected poems, since it announces her father’s lifelong meditation on the relationship between the imagination and reality. “It is important to believe that the visible is the equivalent of the invisible,” Stevens would later write in “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet,” and so, as the poem suggests, to “bend against the invisible” is both to explore its unimagined realms and to be wary of “the false imagination, the false conception of the imagination as some incalculable *vates* within us” (NA 61). It is the “terrible mirror of the sky” Blanche’s eye is enjoined to search, and thus the self is discovered without and not within, in a sublime where she will find herself at once “more truly and more strange” (CP 65). She is an incipient ephebe, a nascent émigré, and in her white name bloom potentially all the colors of Stevens’ tropical cosmos.

That is why she is “Blanche,” but why is she “McCarthy”? It is tempting to want to hear in the oxymoron “terrible mirror” a prefiguring of Yeats’s “terrible beauty” (*Poems* 178), a prefiguring since Stevens’ poem was written in 1915, a year before Yeats’s great meditation on the Irish rebellion. After all, both poems intimate in their respective locutions the idea of terror as a revelation of some *mysterium tremendum* that presses in upon the imagination. Is “Blanche McCarthy” merely a name, an invention, like Stevens’ Crispin, or Chieftain Iffucan, or the Canon Aspirin—a fictive assemblage? “Blanche is a daughter, not of Mallarmé and of Baudelaire, but of Emerson, Whitman, Dickinson,” so Harold Bloom remarks (20). Indeed, to see her as such is to place her, and Stevens’ whole *oeuvre*, within the context of the Emersonian ethos so essential to Bloom’s vision of “poetic crossing,” the process by which poets creatively misread their imaginative forebears. Certainly there is no absence of the transcendental in Stevens.

Yet, while Stevens ought to be read within the main of the American tradition, there are nuances in the work that suggest other influences. Fictive as it is, Blanche McCarthy’s last name at the least affects an Irish origin. One can see it, as Stevens himself saw “Ramon Fernandez” in “The Idea of Order at Key West,” as merely a name. Yet Ramon Fernandez was the name of a literary critic Stevens certainly would have read (Bloom 96, 189). Although as far as we know Blanche McCarthy is not a real person, the Irishness of her name, taken in concert with the other Irish references appearing in Stevens’ work, reveals a spare though crucial inclusion of Irish and Irish American references within the central motifs of his poetry. In short, what is significant about the title “Blanche McCarthy” is that it is fictive and that its fictive character incorporates Irishness and Irish Americanness as a trope within Stevens’ work.

If it is tempting to hear in the phrase “terrible mirror” an albeit anachronistic echo of Yeats, then it is equally tempting—if not more so—to see

the golden, fire-fangled bird of "Of Mere Being" as a transfiguration of Yeats's Byzantine warbler. The one on its golden bough, the other in its palm tree, both sing the lineaments of their respective paradises, though where Yeats's bird sings "Of what is past, or passing, or to come" (*Poems* 192), Stevens' sings "a foreign song" without human meaning or feeling. Where the song of Yeats's bird inclines toward immanence despite its rarified heaven, Stevens' perches at the final frontier of the imaginable, a world utterly transcendent of human conception. Nevertheless, its "fire-fangled feathers dangle down" (*Palm* 398), back as it were into the *mun-do* of imagination. Perched as it is at the very end of Stevens' *Palm at the End of the Mind*, we can trace the vertical axis of Stevens' work from "Blanche McCarthy" to "Of Mere Being"—that is, from first to last. The final gesture of "Blanche McCarthy" is upward into flight; the final display of "Of Mere Being" is downward into the known world. Taken together, the poems inscribe the dynamic circle of Stevens' vision: neither transcendence alone nor immanence alone is sufficient to describe either reality or the imagination. Though the pigeons at the end of "Sunday Morning" sink "Downward to darkness, on extended wings" (*CP* 70), their undulations are ambiguous. To invert Heraclitus' famous dictum, the way down may be the way up—it depends on one's perspective. As Stevens writes in "Esthétique du Mal":

Perhaps,  
 After death, the non-physical people, in paradise,  
 Itself non-physical, may, by chance, observe  
 The green corn gleaming and experience  
 The minor of what we feel. (*CP* 325)

Just so, Stevens continues, "The adventurer / In humanity has not conceived of a race / Completely physical in a physical world." He affirms theoretically this same reciprocity between transcendence and immanence in the essay "Imagination as Value" when he posits: "If the imagination is the faculty by which we import the unreal into what is real, its value is the value of the way of thinking by which we project the idea of God into the idea of man" (*NA* 150). It is at this point, the point of connection between transcendence and immanence—what in a more orthodox context we would call the point of incarnation—that Stevens' vertical axis tilts to the horizontal, and the adventurer in humanity becomes the fictive figure of a surpassing human excellence. It is here that the Irish preoccupation in Stevens' work finds its significance.

Though one can picture the wandering Crispin as first cousin to the wandering Oisín, such insights depend on a more generalized understanding of the voyage motif in Western literature. Crispin is also cousin to Odysseus, Aeneas, Dante, Spenser's Redcrosse Knight, Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, and the Wordsworth of *The Prelude*, among many others;

one need not appeal to archetypal criticism to see him as such. Moreover, after “Blanche McCarthy,” one has to wait until 1942 for “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” and the figure of the MacCullough to find in Stevens’ work any direct allusion to an Irish context, either literal or fictive. As Stevens stated directly in a letter to Henry Church, the man to whom “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” is dedicated, “‘Your Supreme Court Justice’ is the MacCullough of the NOTES. They say that, in Ireland, God is a member of the family and that they treat Him as one of them. For the mass of people, it is certain that humanism would do just as well as anything else. . . . The chief defect of humanism is that it concerns human beings. Between humanism and something else, it might be possible to create an acceptable fiction” (L 448–49).

“Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” is, of course, Stevens’ most sustained effort at achieving that “something else,” that “acceptable fiction”—the great poem of our time that would stand as a kind of epic of the imagination. Not surprisingly, Stevens’ epic is conceived of as a journey, the heroic passage of the ephebe and his ultimate transfiguration by the end of the poem into the fully realized man of imagination, a transfiguration symbolized by his mystical marriage to the “Fat girl, terrestrial,” his “fluent mundo” (CP 406–07). As always in such journeys, the *hierogamy* epitomizes a union of opposites: “Soldier, there is a war between the mind / And sky, between thought and day and night. . . . It is a war that never ends” (CP 407). With this coda Stevens reiterates the prologue’s implication that the shadow side of the imagination is history, and that it is the imagination, properly attuned and employed, that might bring peace.

Though not the apotheosis of the epic’s end, the MacCullough is the essential figure of the poem’s first movement, that embodiment of imaginative vitality toward which the ephebe first moves. Given Stevens’ remarks to Henry Church, the MacCullough is explicitly linked to Ireland not only by being the name of an American Secretary of the Treasury when Stevens was at Harvard (Bloom 189), but more significantly through the figure’s association with what Stevens takes to be an expressly Irish understanding of God. As such, the MacCullough stands between a humanist conception of the world, founded purely in reason, and that “something else”—the imagination which permits reason to transcend its bounds:

If MacCullough himself lay lounging by the sea,

Drowned in its washes, reading in the sound,  
About the thinker of the first idea,  
He might take habit, whether from wave or phrase,

Or power of the wave, or deepened speech,  
Or a leaner being, moving in on him,  
Of greater aptitude and apprehension,

As if the waves at last were never broken,  
As if the language suddenly, with ease,  
Said things it had laboriously spoken. (CP 387)

Though surely, as Harold Bloom affirms, the MacCullough is part of a "Nietzschean trope" (180)—the poem's "major man"—the figure essentially represents the human being coming to consciousness of the self as maker; humanity gaining consciousness of its imaginative potential. As Stevens argues in a letter to Hi Simons:

The gist of this poem is that the MacCullough is MacCullough; MacCullough is any name, any man. The trouble with humanism is that man as God remains man, but there is an extension of man, the leaner being, in fiction, a possibly more than human human, a composite human. The act of recognizing him is the act of this leaner being moving in on us. (L 434)

In quoting this passage, Bloom maintains that Stevens' denial of the Nietzschean influence merely confirms how unconvincing Stevens' denial of influences is. For Bloom, in the MacCullough "we confront Whitman assimilated to Nietzsche, an American Over-Man" (189). To this we may add that Stevens' affirmation of the MacCullough as "any man," a "composite human," merely draws greater attention to the origins of the figure's name within Stevens' preoccupation with Ireland. Therefore, to Bloom's American "grand trope" and "noble synecdoche of Power" (189) we could add an Irish dimension. Why else would Stevens follow his own meditation on the figure of the MacCullough with his consideration of how the Irish envision God? The MacCullough may be an American Everyman but he is framed by his creator in an aura of Irish religious practice. This application of Irishness as a trope in Stevens' personal mythology stands in stark contrast to Eliot's "Apeneck" Sweeney, a figure that within its negative stereotype embodies the degenerate nature of modern humanity.

It is not until the late forties, a few years before Stevens' death, that Ireland takes direct hold of his imagination, though his letters show that he had corresponded with Elizabeth Yeats at Cuala Press as early as 1934 in order, among other things, to secure a copy of Italian philosopher Mario Rossi's Irish travelogue, *Pilgrimage to the West* (see L 564 n 8). As Stevens remarked in a letter to Barbara Church in 1947, "Some years ago Mario Rossi, an Italian philosopher, who teaches at or near Naples visited Ireland and wrote a little book called Journey To the West. It was curious to see what a man whose sight, not to speak of his intelligence, had been developed in the clarity and color of Naples made of the mist and the rain of Ireland" (L 564). What Rossi made of Ireland, among other things, is a romance of "the Irish race" consistent with the Celtic revival. "Ireland itself," so Rossi remarks, "is in reality (to put it roughly) a Celtic coun-

try. . . . Irish Celticism [is] the obstinate permanence of an original spirit athwart all the modern superstructures, athwart mingling of blood, and variations of language and religions" (14).

Rossi's racially infused conception of Ireland and the Irish is even more emphatically in evidence when he remarks, "[the Irish] Celt celticises even more evolved races, that is (perhaps) races decayed as to their vital force in consequence of the hybrid quality inherent in civilisations" (16). The undertones of Rossi's view of Ireland are manifestly racist by inference, if not explicitly so, especially considering that Cuala Press published the book in 1933. Then again, traditionally, Irish nationalism has been distrustful of hybridity, and Rossi's reflections on race no doubt have been deeply shaped by Ireland's particular cultural and historical climate. Not surprisingly, at the end of his journey to the West, Rossi's "celticized" inheritors of the Irish race—William Butler Yeats and Lady Gregory—come to embody not only the essential Ireland but the imagination itself: "This is, I think, the nature of poetry: your soul. Your Irish soul" (50). Here, Rossi's conception of the "Irish soul" elides the fact that Yeats and Lady Gregory are both Anglo-Irish, a matter that renders problematical his appeal to Ireland's specifically racial identity. Indeed, his notion that the Celt "celticises even more evolved races" subverts from the outset his essentialist conception of the Irish soul, unless one is willing to concede that "Celtic blood" possesses powers of cultural transubstantiation.

Certainly Stevens was not immune to racism, and his prejudice toward African-Americans is well-documented in his letters and elsewhere. One need only consult the title of his poem "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery." Yet, nowhere is Rossi's talk of vital racial forces and purity of blood reflected in Stevens' interest in Ireland. Whatever Stevens made of Rossi's sojourn, apart from conjoining the journey motif so important to Stevens' work with Ireland and poetry itself, it surely provides evidence of his perception of Ireland as a metaphor for the imagination. "This is . . . the nature of poetry: your soul. Your Irish soul." The soul to whom Rossi refers belongs to Yeats. Whether by inference or circumstance, here is the Celt as MacCullough, the proto-poet akin to the singer in "The Idea of Order at Key West," an Orpheus *in potentia*, a figure of greater power than modern humanism, which tends to level the axis of transcendence by permitting God to remain man. It is a trope that in the last decade of Stevens' life came to secure real-life roots in the person of Thomas McGreevy.

What Peter Brazeau called "the Dublin-Hartford connection" (533) began in the spring of 1948 when Irish poet and critic Thomas McGreevy wrote Stevens after being informed by Barbara Church that the American poet admired his poetry. So commenced a profoundly important literary friendship. Friend and collaborator with other giants of modern literature like Joyce and Beckett, McGreevy ought to be seen as a significant Irish poet and cultural figure in his own right, having produced a book of poems in 1934 as well as a definitive study of the art of Jack B. Yeats (Jenkins,

"Pressure of Reality" 146 ff.). He also became the director of the National Gallery of Ireland in 1950, two years after his correspondence with Stevens began. By the time of Stevens' death on August 2, 1955, Holly Stevens tells us, it was with McGreevy and with another friend, Barbara Church, that Stevens felt most himself (L 541).

From the outset, in his first letter to McGreevy, Stevens reveals not only the depth of his connection to the Irish poet's work but something of the place Ireland had assumed in his own imagination. "Ireland is rather often in my mind over here," Stevens writes, and continues: "Somehow the image of it is growing fresher and stronger. In any case, the picture one had of it when I was a boy is no longer the present picture. It is something much more modern and vigorous. I don't know whether you feel that change in Dublin. This has nothing to do with propaganda: it is just something that seems to take form without one's knowing why" (L 586-87). Stevens' confession about his own relationship to Ireland is significant on two fronts. First, it reveals that Stevens had an image of Ireland in his mind for the greater portion of his life, though he himself had no Irish ancestry. Second, his inquiry to McGreevy reveals the interplay of the imagination and reality that so possessed his mind and work. We have Stevens' past picture of Ireland, imagined as it is, being tested against the reality of the present. It is almost as if he were himself an émigré, if not from the literal country of his youth, then from an Ireland of his imagination.

Beyond implicating Ireland in Stevens' perennial obsession, this first letter to McGreevy also raises the issue of Stevens' sense of place. Put bluntly, from the standpoint of the imagination one place might just as well be another for Stevens. As he writes in a letter to Barbara Church, "It interests me immensely to have you speak of so many places that have been merely names for me. Yet really they have always been a good deal more than names" (L 610). What they were for Stevens, and what they must be for his readers, are fictive embodiments that emerge from the mind's encounter with place. "In what sense do I live in America," Stevens continues, "if I walk to and fro from the office day after day." In short, one could live anywhere, unless one's imagination is primed to engage the material of reality.

Yet, for Stevens, his sense of place is also determined by his home:

A man living in a twelfth century stronghold in County Dublin pluming himself on such a title inevitably makes me think of Tommy Collins, a poor thing at home when I was a boy, who rode around town in gorgeous costumes. The people in the livery stable used to lend him a white horse. He liked the animal and took good care of it and what a cry would go up when children saw him in the distance coming their way and dressed up say like the Admiral of the Schuylkill and its Convivial Streams. (L 611)

What is remarkable in this passage to McGreevy is Stevens' transformation of a distant place—twelfth-century Dublin—into the familiar, and beyond the familiar into an emblem of America worthy of Norman Rockwell.

McGreevy's idea of America, as Mary Joan Egan observed, "was as stereotyped, and as nearly accurate, as Stevens' idea of Ireland" (130), though where McGreevy for all his attachment to Ireland was a cosmopolitan, living for extended periods in London and Paris, Stevens remained in Hartford and "actualize[d] life abroad" through McGreevy and other correspondents (Brazeau 538). In any case, what matters to Stevens' sense of place is the *idea* of place by which the imagination might be liberated. He makes the point more directly in a letter to Barbara Church:

No doubt you are back somewhere in France after your trip to Ireland. I hope that you saw something of the country there because, for all that Dublin may be, it can hardly be more than one expects it to be and that is merely one more minor metropolis. But the country could be more than that. I like natives: people in civilized countries whose only civilization is that of their own land. Not that I have ever met any: it is merely an idea. Yet it would be nice to meet an idea like that driving a donkey cart, stopping to talk about the rain. (L 613)

It would be easy to see Stevens' invocation of the idea of place here as merely a testament to his own American provinciality. Nevertheless, it is not too great a leap from the idea of place to the idea of order. As he remarks to McGreevy, "The mind with metaphysical affinities has a dash when it deals with reality that the purely realistic mind never has because the purely realistic mind never experiences any passion for reality" (L 597). Stevens' idea that the metaphysical is part and parcel of the order of reality, and hence is the vehicle of the sense of place regardless of one's home, rescues his remarks to Barbara Church from mere provinciality. He makes his understanding plain to Thomas McGreevy when he asks, "Why should not Mr. Yeats be everything that is said of him and for all the fascination of the details of Ireland why should not his imagination make use of it for his imagination's sake, let alone for the sake of Ireland? The same is true of any land of which any artist is a part" (L 652). For Stevens, through his encounter with McGreevy and a lifetime of significant if intermittent reflection, the idea of Ireland had been subsumed into the place of his imagination.

Nowhere in Stevens' work is the assimilation of Ireland and Irishness into the poet's fictive world more apparent than in "Our Stars Come from Ireland," the first section of which found direct inspiration in McGreevy's own poems "Homage to Hieronymous Bosch" and "Recessional."<sup>1</sup> In the first section of Stevens' poem, as the subtitle tells us, "*Tom McGreevy, in America, Thinks of Himself as a Boy.*" More than assuming the persona of the

stock, nostalgic immigrant remembering Ireland years after his American wake, the poem transforms memory into a self-conscious act of imagination:

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

For the Tom McGreevy of the poem, Ireland—the place of origin—is created through the act of imagining it into being, as is the original self who is recollected, initially at least, as someone “other” than the imaginer. As Lawrence Kramer points out, there is an ambivalence in the poem, especially if one conceives of the speaker as a “transcendental ego” (226) that nevertheless is born of a place. According to Kramer, Tom McGreevy’s identity can be affirmed only by the poem’s denial of self-separation through the mind’s creation of its origin. In such a reading, the transcendental self becomes imagination’s fiat by which the passage of time and place and thus the discontinuity of self is overcome.

Undergirding Kramer’s view is the tendency to read Stevens exclusively through the ethos of American transcendentalism. Such a view relies almost exclusively on what I have called the vertical axis in Stevens’ work. Yet this is not the balanced view Stevens himself suggests in his letter to Thomas McGreevy, where the origin of the poem in the Irish poet’s own work becomes evident. In his letter, Stevens offers two views of McGreevy’s lines:

High above the Bank of Ireland  
Unearthly music sounded,  
Passing westwards.

I thought about these lines of yours. Arranged as they are with the reality in the first line one’s attention is focussed on the reality. Had the order been reversed and had the lines read:

Unearthly music sounded,  
Passing westwards  
High above the Bank of Ireland

the attention would have been focused on what was unreal. (*L* 596)

More than elucidating a minor technical point, Stevens’ observations about reality and unreality here capture the essential tension in what would

become his adaptation of McGreevy's lines in "Our Stars Come from Ireland":

Over the top of the Bank of Ireland,  
The wind blows quaintly  
Its thin-stringed music,  
As he heard it in Tarbert. (CP 454)

If anything, Stevens' modification of McGreevy's poem involves directing the focus of the poem more emphatically toward reality, toward the horizontal axis of his work. As such, a stanza that begins with the speaker's eyes directed upward ends with an evocation of the ferry at Tarbert, Thomas McGreevy's home village in Kerry. The transcendental act of making one's identity, affirmed in the first stanza, is thus qualified by the trope of passage that exists as a kind of substructure within the poem. "What would the water have been," Tom McGreevy asks, "Without that that *he* makes of it?" (CP 455; my emphasis). Here, McGreevy's initial declaration of self-making is transposed to the boy he was and into a kind of transcendental present that has the power to re-create the past. This transformation is signaled by the shift from past tense, the verb tense in which the poem began, to the present tense of the poem's final stanza. Yet it is water, the medium of his passage away from his invented origin, that makes such invention possible. The unearthly music that passes westward in Thomas McGreevy's poem gives way in Stevens' poem to an earthly passage westward that enables the self to become its own muse, an invention that paradoxically invents the self.

Of course, it might be argued that the voice of "Our Stars Come from Ireland" is actually ambivalent, shifting, and therefore that the McGreevy persona may not be the sole speaker of the poem's first part, thereby disrupting the trope of passage at its outset. From this perspective the "I" that opens the poem is not McGreevy at all but Stevens who, having assumed the persona of his double, now summarizes his reading of the Irish poet's "Recessional":

I could hear  
Where listeners still hear—  
That far-away, dear  
Roar  
The long silvery roar  
Of Mal Bay. (Qtd. in Brazeau 535)

Although it may be true that the poem evolved out of Stevens' deep emotional response to McGreevy's lines, to read the speaker of the poem as "shifting" between personas rather than as the speech of a single persona, "Tom McGreevy," is to ignore the subtitle's self-evident direction to the

reader: "*Tom McGreevy, in America, Thinks of Himself as a Boy.*" The persona may be a double for Stevens, but to neglect the poet's clear intention to *fictionalize* the voice is to miss a crucial attribute of the poem's dramatic organization.

In any case, the complex relationship between unreality and reality in the poem, between reality and the imagination, inheres in the persona of Tom McGreevy. Obviously, the Tom McGreevy of the poem is not the Thomas McGreevy of the letters, though clearly Stevens intended the "unreal" McGreevy to echo his real friend. Thomas McGreevy, of course, never emigrated from Ireland despite being well-traveled, and so Stevens' persona views his life through the prism of a journey that essentially defines the difference between Stevens' friend and his fictive speaker. From another perspective, the musings of the fictive Tom McGreevy communicate a sense of place nearer to Stevens' own origins:

These things were made of him  
And out of myself.  
He stayed in Kerry, died there.  
I live in Pennsylvania. (CP 455)

The first section of "Our Stars Come from Ireland" ends:

The stars are washing up from Ireland  
And through and over the puddles of Swatara  
And Schuylkill. The sound of him  
Comes from a great distance and is heard. (CP 455)

Pennsylvania, the Swatara, and the Schuylkill are place names from Stevens' own childhood, as he himself remarks in a letter to his Irish friend (L 611). Perhaps, then, it is appropriate to see Tom McGreevy, the "transcendental self" of this poem, as a composite self, a speaker whose voice originates not in Ireland or America but in an imagined fusion of both realities—a conception only underscored by any "shiftiness" in the poem's pronouns. To read the poem in this way is not to deny its transcendentalist affinities, or its compositional origins, but to extend the range of experience that so informs its idea of being American. In the sound of Tom McGreevy's dead self coming from its great distance, and now traced again in the self's long passage west, the unearthly music of Thomas McGreevy's Irish poem gains new embodiment in the imagined reality of Stevens' American idiom.

Yet, to claim the backward look of "Our Stars Come from Ireland" constitutes an alteration in Stevens' squarely American poetic seems to contradict not only the preponderance of Stevens' most notable critics but also the poet himself. In another letter to McGreevy, Stevens observes: "Conceding that the generations of people there have not lived in vain, it

is still probably true that there are infinitely more meanings for Americans in America" (L 691). More flamboyantly, Stevens underscored the importance of the American locality to his sensibility when he wrote, again to McGreevy, "I am, after all, more moved by the first sounds of the birds on my street than by the death of a thousand penguins in Antarctica" (L 632).

Stevens' seeming lack of environmental conscience notwithstanding, his emphatic embrace of America as the proper arena for his poetry takes on moral import in "Dutch Graves in Bucks County." "Dutch Graves," what Harold Bloom calls Stevens' pugnacious and polemical "stand against the past" (219), underscores both his moral repugnance at the brutal aspect of human history and his hope that America offers the promise of a new beginning. The poet's "semblables" are, among other things, "mossy cronies," "Monsters antique and haggard with past thought" whose "crackling of voices" (CP 292) bespeak an archaic freedom awful in its power to shape the present. What follows is a view of historical brutality worthy of Seamus Heaney's *North*, which elaborates its own vision of reciprocal violence, or Derek Mahon's "A Disused Shed in County Wexford" with its evocation of lost peoples and cultures:

Freedom is like a man who kills himself  
Each night, an incessant butcher, whose knife  
Grows sharp in blood. The armies kill themselves,  
And in their blood an ancient evil dies—  
The action of incorrigible tragedy. (CP 292)

Ultimately, a double vision inheres in Stevens' poem. On the one hand, the past is claimed to be "not part of the present" (CP 291). As such, a genuine freedom—a freedom from the past—appears possible, though only to the poet's dead ancestors. On the other hand, the ancient evil that dies with each historical tragedy lives again in the living, the "violent marchers of the present" who "March toward a generation's centre" (CP 293). Does the double vision of this poem really constitute a purely Emersonian stand against the past, and therefore an affirmation of Whitman's visionary America, the avatar of democratic vistas wholly new? Rather than a pure negation of the past, the poem demonstrates an appropriation of the past with an eye toward transformation. What fuels the poem is Stevens' perennial "rage for order," and not as the poem suggests "a chaos composed in more than order" (CP 293), the precise arcs of World War II's rumbling armies. What makes that transformative vision possible is the same backward look witnessed in the first section of "Our Stars Come from Ireland" and, as Stevens affirms in "Dutch Graves," so discerning an appropriation of the past is the legacy of "The much too many disinherited" (CP 292), who, like the fictive Tom McGreevy, were forced by history to embark on the creation of a new identity out of a convergence of the past and the present.

Stevens' obsession with his personal genealogy during the 1940s and early 1950s surely informed the composition of "Dutch Graves in Bucks County," but beyond the making of any single poem Stevens' fascination with his ancestors deepens his connection with the circumstance of Tom McGreevy in "Our Stars Come from Ireland." "[T]o let a little daylight into the attic of the past . . . to form an acceptable realization of the past" (L 448), so Stevens wrote to Henry Church, is the goal of both the poet and his fictive persona. The parallel between Stevens' obsession with his Dutch ancestry and Tom McGreevy's interest in his Irish origins intensifies in "About One of Marianne Moore's Poems," an essay included in *The Necessary Angel*, where Stevens recounts a visit to the Zeller house in Tupperhocken, Pennsylvania, which leads him to a meditation on the faith of his forebears. A family of religious refugees, their reality, Stevens observes, "consisted of both the visible and the invisible" (NA 100). It therefore anticipates his claim that the joining of the imagination and reality in poetry must be in its measure "a compensation for what has been lost" with the decline of religious faith (NA 171). The stars that wash up from Ireland in Stevens' poem suggest the idea of poetry as a "transcendent analogue" achieved through Tom McGreevy's retrospective act of self-creation. The parallel deepens further in his recollection of a trip with a fellow genealogical enthusiast to Christ Church, near Souchsburg. "This stout old Lutheran," Stevens writes, "felt about his church very much as the Irish are said to feel about God. Kate O'Brien says that in Ireland God is a member of the family" (NA 100). Echoing his earlier remarks to Henry Church about the Irish view of God, the faith of Stevens' fathers—their supreme fiction—again reveals a felt resemblance to the Irish idea of God, at least as Stevens understands it. The point would be incidental were it not that Stevens repeats the same observation using very nearly the same phrasing in letters to Henry Church in 1943 and again to Thomas McGreevy in 1948 (L 448, 597).

If what has been called Stevens' "central-perceiving self" (La Guardia 156) is bound exclusively to the mainstream of American transcendentalism, even to the inclusion of his genealogical preoccupations within that critical framework, how is it that in these last years of his life Stevens confessed an affinity with an Irish writer's account of how God is seen in Ireland, and he did so not merely in personal letters but in *The Necessary Angel*, his definitive statement of his poetics? The answer is that, in the last great flowering of Stevens' imagination, the Irish experience of historical disinheritance and the need to reconcile that disinheritance with some metaphysical order had become an analogue for the human predicament. Indeed, Stevens' affiliation with Irishness assumes political undertones when he observes to Thomas McGreevy, "It would not surprise me if in time [America] came to be much better friends with the Irish in Eire than we have ever been with the English in England" (L 611). By his own account, this profound resonance between Irish and American

reverberates in the common refugee history of Stevens' own family, and it resounds in both Stevens' poetry and his poetics.

As Stevens observes in "The Relations between Poetry and Painting," "The world about us would be desolate except for the world within us," and he goes on to characterize the "interchange between these two worlds" as a "migratory passing[]" (NA 169). Stevens' implied idea of the poet's work as an effort to chart, as it were, the mind's continuous migration between reality and the imagination inheres in the concept of "transport," one of the central recurrent tropes of his work. The primacy of "transport" announces itself explicitly in the title of his book *Transport to Summer*, though the idea of transport is implied already in an early poem "The Comedian as the Letter C." On the one hand, "transport" recalls the use of the term by Longinus; it describes the soul's migration from this world into the sublime. On the other, it recalls the mass movements within time and history that evoke pictures of millions forced from their homes by what Stevens called "the pressure of reality." By the pressure of reality Stevens means "the pressure of an external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation" (NA 20). For Stevens, the first meaning of "transport" as a kind of ascension out of reality into the sublime is meant to redress the second notion of transport and its associations with war, forced migration, and genocide. We could say then that "transport" as a central trope of Stevens' late poetics stands at the point of convergence between the two axial directions of his work.

The moral and imaginative ambition of Stevens' late work is to transform "transport," conceived of as mere migration—an external event that stifles contemplation—into a figure of possible transcendence in which the pressure of reality is transfigured and not merely released. In addition to its own obvious import for how we view Stevens' work and the place of the "Irish poems" within his *oeuvre*, this conception of transport, particularly westward, bears further reflection in the light of diaspora literatures, including Irish and Irish American. To borrow from Paul Gilroy, the backward look of Tom McGreevy not only reveals a composite self, it also encodes a "double consciousness" (30, 161)—the transported and thereby necessarily "invented self" and the "original self" that it must reinvent. It is this fusion of the imagination and reality in the idea of transport, at once essential to Stevens' work and relevant to literary approaches centering on the historical experience of migration, that saves both reality from becoming desolate and the imagination from becoming merely escapist.

In "*The Westwardness of Everything*," the second section of "Our Stars Come from Ireland," Stevens explicitly takes the reality of Irish migration to America and uses it as one of his most successful tropes of imaginative transport. The stars that wash up from Ireland in the first half of the poem, emblems of an original sublime, are now emblems of a sublime made present in the moment, at once apocalyptic and generative: "the ashes of fiery weather . . . luminously wet" (CP 455). Tom McGreevy, the self of the

first section, disappears and an anonymous, unnamed voice takes over. Yet, now as before, the speaker's reflections do not transport him to a purely transcendent otherworld. Instead, they register the pressure of reality, for he finally likens the "green stars" to "beautiful and abandoned refugees" (CP 455). It is this migration of the imagination into reality that occasions an alteration in the poem's world that can only be called transfigurative:

The whole habit of the mind is changed by them,  
These Gaeled and fitful-fangled darkneses  
Made suddenly luminous, themselves a change,  
An east in their compelling westwardness,

Themselves an issue as at an end, as if  
There was an end at which in a final change,  
When the whole habit of the mind was changed,  
The ocean breathed out morning in one breath. (CP 455)

In these stunning lines the retrospect of the poem's first section becomes a prospect verging on the edge of time and space in which the imagination and reality become joined within the transfiguring presence of Being itself. In "Of Mere Being," the coda poem of *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, the tail feathers of Stevens' paradisaical bird are "fire-fangled" and "dangle down" out of the pure sublime and into the figural world of human language. The poem's "fitful-fangled" stars anticipate that later apotheosis, though they do so by inscribing history—and in particular Irish American history—into Stevens' elaborate figural transfiguration.

Westwardness, of course, is the idea around which this section of the poem revolves, and it is the idea toward which the first section pointed in the very urgency of Tom McGreevy's backward look east. The idea of westwardness had been weighing on Stevens as well around the time of the poem's composition, as his words to Thomas McGreevy testify:

What you say in one of your letters about your westwardness as a result of living near the Shannon Estuary interested me. The house in which I was born and lived as a boy faced the west and wherever I have lived if the house faced any other way I have always been pulling it round on an axis to get it straight. But that is the least of this sort of thing. After all, instead of facing the Atlantic, you might have faced London and Paris. The poem which I sent you some time ago is one of two. The other is on this very subject: the westwardness of things. (L 618)

Beyond making specific reference to the two sections of "Our Stars Come from Ireland" and demonstrating again the extent of Thomas McGreevy's

influence on the poem's composition, Stevens' considerations in this letter reveal him establishing a historical and ultimately imaginative parallel between the circumstance of being Irish and his own American origins. The "westwardness of things" is the idea that links the two, and it is around this idea that the axis of Stevens' imagination revolves. Of course, "Our Stars Come from Ireland" is not the sole reference to westwardness in Stevens' work. As we have seen, Crispin in "The Comedian as the Letter C" travels west and then east again. In "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," Stevens' unnamed traveler descends "The western day through what you called / The loneliest air" (CP 65). In contrast, in "Evening without Angels" Stevens speaks of a "desire for day / Accomplished in the immensely flashing East" (CP 137). The east-west axis is a consistent imaginative orientation in Stevens' poetry, an orientation that follows the perennial path of the sun across the heavens as well as that of Tom McGreevy and the other refugees of history across the sea from Ireland and Europe.

At the beginning of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens claims that the ephebe "must become an ignorant man again / And see the sun again with an ignorant eye / And see it clearly in the idea of it" (CP 380). In "The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand-Man," he says again of the sun, "The wheel survives the myths" (CP 222). At such times Stevens emphasizes his desire not to rely on any received mythology, but to force the imagination to find its own source in the thing itself. Of course, as Stevens knows, there can be no perception without the imagination, the imagination at the origin of things. Hence, again in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," the sun that "Must bear no name" is immediately called "gold flourisher." To be in between the thing itself and the naming of things is, for Stevens, to be "In the difficulty of what it is to be" (CP 381). As such, Stevens does not simply abjure old mythologies but reinvents them for his own imaginative needs. Though in "Credences of Summer" he claims that the goal is to "Trace the gold sun about the whitened sky / Without evasion by a single metaphor" (CP 373), the sun's rising in the east, its passage across the heavens and eventual descent in the west, represents an originary migration, the kind of which religions are made and cultures are defined. In such symbolic organizations of space, to turn westward is to look toward death, for it is in the west that the sun completes its journey. In this light, the westwardness of everything is a figure for the migration of all things toward death, the final change in a world defined by change, and Stevens clearly intends to let these associations echo in the poem.

There are other echoes as well, since the poem's darknesses are "Gaeled." Tom McGreevy's passage west repeats the western journey found in the Irish *imrama*, the visionary passages west of Mael Duin and Bran and Oisín and Brendan. Moreover, since Stevens' persona is an emigrant from the west of Ireland, his prospects at the end of the poem recall the luminous "New Island" (*An tOileán Úr*) of the Irish peasant, an America mythologized into a land of gold, a version of the sublime such as *Tír nAn Óg*, the

Land of the Young in Irish mythology. The American myth of the westwardness of things is yet another version of the sublime. It is Whitman's open road, the place where our destiny as a new people will be made manifest in an ever-expanding American identity. "[T]he sublime comes down / To the spirit itself," Stevens observes in "The American Sublime," "The empty spirit / In vacant space" (CP 131). Surely Stevens' American sublime brings us to the limit of Whitman's open road, or perhaps positions us on the brink of Whitman's imaginative circumnavigation of the globe in "Salut Au Monde!"

Luke Gibbons' observation on the myths of the West in Ireland and America is salient to this point. In *Transformations in Irish Culture* he notes:

For all their similarities as foundational myths—sharing agrarian ideals, an aversion to law and order and to the centralization of the state—it is the differences between them that are most striking. The wild west is an outpost of individualism, extolling the virtues of the self-made man that lie at the heart of the American dream. By contrast, the recourse to the west in Ireland is impelled by a search for community, a desire to escape the isolation of the self and to immerse oneself in the company of others. (13)

Indeed, the Irish and American myths of the West would seem to be irreconcilable. However, in the case of Stevens' persona, Tom McGreevy, the sublime is anything but vacant and solitary; it is that which gathers up all the habitations of the mind as well as its habits, and transforms them. One might say that the Irish influence, clearly evident in the poem, enabled Stevens to re-imagine the lineaments of his American sublime. Thus, having followed Tom McGreevy's migration west, his stars not only represent the inevitable movement of all life toward its end, but discern in that end the enduring human longing to answer death with a new beginning, or as the speaker observes, "An east in their compelling westwardness" (CP 455). This is an end, as Stevens' poem states, that entails an issue—the promise of new life transfigured out of death. That transfiguration arrives on a slight horizon to be sure, "as if," though it is enough for Stevens to envision a final change that reverses westwardness itself, change itself however demythologized and remythologized; and so by the poem's end beginning and end are one, the ocean breathes out morning in one breath. "Naked Alpha," as Stevens says in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," has been inscribed imaginatively into "hierophant Omega" (CP 469).

Yet, is this moment of transfiguration merely a "chilly retreat" (Kramer 227) from Tom McGreevy's initial backward look toward his first place, an abstraction and ultimately an evasion that undoes the very passage that brought both the figural emigrant and the emigrant reader to this prospect? If we read the poem as more than another example of the Ameri-

can sublime, and therefore not merely as an instance of the imagination totalizing itself into a pure and solitary transcendence, and we see instead, in Tom McGreevy's journey west, a figuralism grounded in historical reality, then Stevens' stars do not deconstruct his persona's origin—they transport it with them. In Stevens' fluent *mundo*, as in the world we sense and know, the journey westward eventually brings us east again. It evinces, in Stevens' words, "an interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals" (NA 27). Though that interdependence does not collapse the inherent differences between the Irish and American myths of the West, it does manage to hold them together in a tensive figural unity.

In "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," Stevens exclaims, "In the high west there burns a furious star" (CP 14). A quarter century later, it is fair to say that in "Our Stars Come from Ireland" Stevens pursued that star to its green apogee. It is also fair to say that in the late section he called *The Rock* Stevens realized another ideal likewise anticipated in that early poem: "Like a dull scholar, I behold, in love, / An ancient aspect touching a new mind" (CP 16). Near the end of his life, Stevens' "new mind" permitted him to embrace more fiercely and consummately than previously in his work what Ralph Mills called "the possibilities of the created world" (98). The ancient aspect Stevens momentarily beholds in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" comprises the major object of his contemplation in *The Rock*, and it marks a major advance in worldview from the nakedly shining star of "Nuances of a Theme by Williams," a reality that "mirrors nothing" (CP 18). By contrast, in the poem "The Rock" sheer physical reality is at once "The starting point of the human and the end" (CP 528) and not merely a lofty otherness seemingly beyond the brink of imagination. It reveals "The desire to be at the end of distances" (CP 527), the desire that, like that of "Our Stars Come from Ireland," affirms the idea of origin through the very distances traversed abroad from the source of self.

It was not that Stevens wished to be reduced "to a state of unrelieved realism" (L 760), a concern he expressed in a letter to Barbara Church. In the same letter, however, he does reflect:

The close approach to reality has always been the supreme difficulty of any art: the communication of actuality . . . has been not only impossible, but has never appeared to be worth while because it loses identity as the event passes. . . . Nevertheless the desire to combine the two things, poetry and reality, is a constant desire. (L 760)

Remarkably, immediately following these remarks, Stevens recounts the origin of what is one of the finest and most representative poems of *The Rock*, a poem that thereby constitutes one of most succinct and moving reflections on the imagination and reality and thus the human place within the order of the created world:

Jack Sweeney (the Boston Sweeney) sent me a post-card from County Clare the other day—the worn cliffs towering up over the Atlantic. It was like a gust of freedom, a return to the spacious, solitary world in which we used to exist. . . . (L 760–61)

The poem anticipated by Stevens' account is, of course, "The Irish Cliffs of Moher." Perhaps never before has so much been made of what Richard Hugo would have called a poem's triggering moment, the arrival of a simple postcard. "Who is my father in this world, in this house, / At the spirit's base? / My father's father, his father's father, his—" (CP 501) so the poem begins. More than merely rhetorical, the poem's question establishes a genealogical conceit whereby the poet's imagination travels back to its generative center at "the core of all creation" (La Guardia 157). In that conceit, Tom McGreevy's backward look in "Our Stars Come from Ireland" penetrates beyond the lure of personal origins. In Stevens' vision it travels back "to a parent before thought, before speech, / At the head of the past" (CP 501). In making this visionary journey back through time and space, "The Irish Cliffs of Moher" reverses the passage west traveled in Stevens' other explicitly Irish poem. Yet, just as "Our Stars Come from Ireland" envisioned an east in the world's compelling westwardness, so "The Irish Cliffs of Moher" envisions a west mythologized in the eastwardness of Ireland. Stevens, the American descendant of Dutch emigrants who made the journey west like the emigrant Irish, finds in the cliffs a semblance of eternity. They are not *Tir nAn Og*, the Land of the Young discovered beyond the western edge of the known, though they are of wondrous aspect, rising as they do "out of the mist, / Above the real / Rising out of present time and place, above / The wet, green grass" (CP 501–02). At the crux of east and west, as well as above and below, Stevens' Cliffs of Moher are the embodiment of the earth's own generative imagination, at once pre-human and pre-conscious and the source of human consciousness:

This is not landscape, full of the somnambulations  
Of poetry

And the sea. This is my father or, maybe,  
It is as he was,

A likeness, one of the race of fathers: earth  
And sea and air. (CP 502)

To picture the cliffs as simply "A likeness" is not merely to bear witness to an interdependence of reality and the imagination but to avow an indwelling of each in the other. To extend that likeness by extending the genealogical trope with which the poem began to its ultimate realization in

the human mind's elemental oneness with the world constitutes nothing less than the fulfillment of Stevens' whole poetic quest. It is also now to envision a communal dimension to Stevens' American sublime, one derived explicitly from the west of Ireland. "[T]his end and this beginning are one" (CP 506), Stevens states in "The Hermitage at the Centre"; and in "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," "We say God and the imagination are one" (CP 524); and, finally, in "The Rock,"

It is the rock where tranquil must adduce  
Its tranquil self, the main of things, the mind,

The starting point of the human and the end. . . .  
(CP 528)

In Wallace Stevens' "The Irish Cliffs of Moher," we arrive at the pivotal center of the poet's life's work, and we have arrived there by charting his fascination with Irishness in poems that are few in number but of immense importance. That center is a long way from Blanche McCarthy's "unimagined coverts," yet it appears nascent if not present there as well amid the symbols going by and the glare of revelations—an idea of self and world glimpsed beyond the dead glass of solipsism, one that, we should add by invoking Whitman's phrase from "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," contains "The similitudes of the past and those of the future" (160).

Near the end of his life Stevens confessed to his friend Thomas McGreevy, "I have not even begun to touch the spheres within spheres that might have been possible if, instead of devoting the principal amount of my time to making a living, I had devoted it to thought and poetry" (L 669). The American poet's veiled allusion to Dante in this lament to his Irish friend might seem surprising coming from a poet so wary of old mythologies, at least those unaltered by his own imagination. Yet it is an aspiration with which Yeats would have sympathized, though surely he would have been less sympathetic toward Stevens' American pragmatism, his "paudeen" tendency to place his imaginative aspirations within the context of economic reality. Nevertheless, though not essentially Irish or Irish American, Wallace Stevens' poetry, and particularly the poetry of his later years, attempts nothing less than "the figuration of blessedness" (CP 526) and employs figurations of Irishness to secure that achievement even to the end. "The catalogue of early Irish Christian art, from the Sweeneys, came this morning," so he wrote to Barbara Church five months before he died: "The identity of the Irish with their religion is the same thing as the identity of the Irish with their lonely, misty, distant land. . . . I shall study this catalogue with the greatest interest" (L 877). And so, to judge by his past fascination with Ireland and the imagination, he would have.

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## Note

<sup>1</sup>See Peter Brazeau, 535 ff.; Mary Joan Egan, 126 ff.; and Lee Jenkins, "Thomas McGreevy and the Pressure of Reality," 149 ff., and *Wallace Stevens: Rage for Order*, 94 ff.

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## Places for the Future to Come: Wallace Stevens and Frank Lloyd Wright

MICHAEL BEEHLER

*You may see, there in the Unity Temple, how I dealt with this  
great architectural problem. . . . You will find the sense of . . .  
space not walled in now but more or less free to appear.*

—Frank Lloyd Wright, “The Destruction of the Box”

*[T]he temple is never quite composed. . . .*

—Wallace Stevens, *Letters*

THE ABOVE EPIGRAM is taken from a 1940 letter from Wallace Stevens to Hi Simons, in which the poet explains “Owl’s Clover” to his new friend and correspondent. Focusing specifically on “Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue,” Stevens highlights the poem’s central issue—“What this poem is concerned with is adaptation to change,” he writes—stressing the dynamic movement of the world we live in, the living world in which “change is incessant” (L 366, 367). Stevens, of course, takes great pleasure in this living changefulness, and here in his letter to Simons he emphasizes the interpenetration of stasis and change that guarantees that the world can never be finally locked in the statue or housed in a temple. Change is the process, he argues, of “passing from hopeless waste to hopeful waste,” and thus although “[t]he world is completely waste . . . it is a waste always full of portentous lustres” (L 367). It is the intersecting of the enfolding present (“waste”) with an unfolding future (“portentous lustres”)—the way, that is to say, this “oncoming future” more or less comes through in the present, dislocating it, setting it in motion, “whirling apart and wide away” (L 367)—that constitutes Stevens’ sense of a living space that *takes place* in the present by *holding open a space* for the “oncoming,” for what will come to that place from the *not yet* of a future to which it promises itself. *Rooted* in the present, this space is nevertheless not hopelessly boxed in by it, for it is at the same time *en route* toward the unspecified, incoming futurity signaled by the lustrous portents or traces that enliven the static world of “presence” with the mobile, living “force” that gives hope, and gives the future *itself*, a chance, by opening a space for that future in the enclosing folds of the present (OP 198). Stevens’ entire poetic career can be read as an effort to inhabit this hope-full, living space.

This is, of course, a poetic problem—a problem of how to write a poetry dedicated to the *not yet* of the oncoming future, a poetry in which hope can live—but it is one that Stevens, here in the Simons letter, speaks of in architectural terms. Reflecting back on his past, he tells Simons, “When I was a boy I used to think that things progressed by contrasts. . . . But this was building the world out of blocks” (L 368). The insufficiency of such a building technique is clear: to build the world out of contrasting blocks is to construct a deadly place of spaces boxed in by the rigidity of walls that *hous*e the world by enfolding it within a defensively sheltering perimeter. Such a boxed-in world—one whose construction technique is perhaps reflected by the “Anecdote of the Jar” (which could just as easily be the anecdote of the “block”)—is precisely what Stevens is at pains to destroy with his emphasis on living futurity and incessant change. Thus he rejects this childish, static building and replaces it with a construction based not on the box or block, but on a dynamic, energizing “interplay, interaction”: “Cross-reflections, modifications, counter-balances, complements, giving and taking are illimitable. They make things inter-dependent, and their inter-dependence sustains them [a man and a woman] and gives them pleasure” (L 368).

Such an interactive, built space is the site of the interpenetration of the static and the ex-statically mobile, where one is at once *rooted* in place and *en route* from place itself. It is a living space: a spaced-out “‘mobile edifice’ ” (OP 298) housing the paradox of what Frank Lloyd Wright alludes to as “space not [simply] walled in now but *more or less* free to appear” (“Destruction” 3; my emphasis). How to build a space in which hope and futurity can live; how to construct a living space at once *rooted* in an unfolding present and *en route* toward an unfolding future for which it holds a place: what is a poetic problem in Stevens is an architectural problem in Wright. What joins the poet to the architect is their shared antipathy for “the box”—the material box of a traditional architecture that forecloses the future by walling in space, and the conceptual box that enacts a similar foreclosure, walling in the world of “force” and change—of the hope that is the trace of the oncoming future—into the metaphysical box of “presence” (OP 198).

Stevens was certainly no architect, and it is surprising how rarely, in his letters, journals, and elsewhere, he responds to or even seems to notice the built environment that surrounds him. Yet, as James Baird amply demonstrated in his 1968 *The Dome and the Rock*, the motif of architecture—of builders and buildings; of the problems of place, space, and housing that are the foundations of architectural thinking and theory—pervades Stevens’ poetry, leading Baird to conclude that that poetry is a kind of architecture and that “the poet lived an architect’s full life” (311). By the same token, Frank Lloyd Wright, whose life and works spanned nearly the same years as Stevens’ (Wright was born in 1867 and died in 1959; Stevens, born 1879, died 1955), was no poet in the traditional sense, yet he repeatedly empha-

sized the similarities between poetry and architecture, writing in *An Organic Architecture* (1939), for example, that “[a] good building is the greatest of poems when it is organic architecture,” and that therefore “[e]very great architect is—necessarily—a great poet” (*American Architecture* 38).

Stevens, the poet-architect, and Wright, the architect-poet, never met and, to my knowledge, their writings give no indication of their even being aware of each other’s lives or works. It is perhaps not surprising that Wright was not aware of the Hartford poet, but it is quite astonishing that Stevens, whose travels took him in the late teens to Chicago, where Wright had achieved both professional notoriety and public scandal just a handful of years earlier, remained apparently unaware of Wright. Nevertheless, there are some interesting points of biographical congruence: both Wright and Stevens, for example, admired Carl Sandburg (*Parts* 119; *Secret* 442); both were drawn to and owned prints by the renowned Japanese woodcut artist Ando Hiroshige (according to Glen MacLeod, Stevens owned two Hiroshige prints [MacLeod, Appendix], while Wright’s collection numbered more than two hundred [Secret 186]); and both were acquaintances of James Johnson Sweeney—Stevens through his friendship with Sweeney’s brother John, and Wright through the stormy process of building his last work, the Guggenheim Museum, of which Sweeney became director after Solomon Guggenheim’s death in 1949. It is unfortunate that Wright’s museum was not begun until the year after Stevens’ death in 1955. It seems certain, given the poet’s interest in art and his delight in visiting New York museums, that had he lived, he would have experienced Wright’s last and most well known public building (the Guggenheim opened in 1959, the year of Wright’s own death). We can only speculate on what the poet’s response to the architect’s work might have been.

These biographical curiosities, while interesting in themselves, are tangential to my main interest here: namely, the ways in which a sense of place conceived as living changefulness permeates both Stevens’ poetry and Wright’s architecture, and how that hope-filled sense of place—as that which *takes* place by *making a place and holding it open* for the oncoming, for the future—is reflected in their thinking about such issues as space, housing, and the poetic and architectural destruction of the “box.” All of these issues can begin to be seen in Stevens’ Simons letter and in the epigram from Wright’s discussion of the theory behind his construction of the Unity Temple in Chicago (1905–08). But they also resonate with one last, fascinating biographical coincidence. Wright often traced the origins of his thinking about architecture back to certain gifts he received from his mother: the famous “Froebel gifts”—geometrically shaped blocks of wood and strips of colored paper—that Wright, in his autobiography, describes as the “smooth shapely maple blocks with which to build, the sense of which never afterward leaves the fingers: *form* becoming *feeling*” (*Autobiography* 13).

The kindergarten method developed by Friedrich Froebel with which Wright's mother became enamored emphasized, as Neil Levine puts it, the "underlying geometric order of nature" and provided a "basis for understanding the theory of mimesis as a process of *abstraction from the specific to the general*, which is to say from the natural to the conventional." As a consequence of this early training, abstraction, for Wright, became not the "independent agent of a purely geometric construct, as it later would become in the theories of Neoplasticism and Non-objectivity," but rather acquired an "epiphenomenal status, being the consequence of the simplifying, clarifying, and epitomizing process of representation" (Levine 11). What Wright appears to have learned from playing with the Froebel blocks, that is to say, is that building must be an interdependence or dialectical balance of "abstraction and representation," such that architecture is understood "not simply as a pure abstraction but rather in the dialectical terms of nature and geometry brought together to produce a composition of conventionalized, or stylized, forms grounded in the world of representation and taking its order from that creative impulse" (Levine 37). Wright might have learned to build the world out of blocks, but those blocks would always be energized by the interplay and interaction Stevens celebrates in the Simons letter and that his critics have formalized as the "[c]ross-reflections" and "counter-balances" of the reality/imagination dialectic (*L* 368). Thus although Wright's attitude toward building blocks is different from Stevens', their thinking about blocks reaches a similar conclusion, one pointing toward the hopefulness found in their dynamic sense of building and of space.

Although Stevens might not have actually played with Froebel blocks, he certainly knew of Froebel's educational theories from a certain Miss Sybil Gage, daughter of a friend of W. G. Peckham, for whom Stevens was clerking in 1902, and whom the poet met while on vacation with the Peckhams in the Adirondacks. Holly Stevens' "informant" tells her that Sybil Gage "had been studying Froebel and Pestalozzi, and was enthusiastic about them. She had been telling Wallace Stevens about them. . . . [But] [a]ccording to Sybil, your father was a bit skeptical about the two men, and wrote her the enclosed poem, both to kid her about her enthusiasm, and to pay her a very pretty compliment" (*SP* 102–03). The poem, "To Miss Gage," begins with the line, "Froebel be hanged! And Pestalozzi—pooh!" and goes on to argue that "No weazened Pedagogy" can touch the "thin souls" of children with "immortal fire," concluding

"Only in such as you the spirit gleams  
With the rich beauty that compassions give:  
Children no science—but a world of dreams  
Where fearful futures of the Real live." (*SP* 103)

Apparently the problem Stevens has with the Froebel method is that it boxes children into a “science” walled off from the counter-balancing futurity signaled by “dreams.” Thus the dialectical energy Wright takes from the Froebel blocks is overlooked by Stevens in his own assault on an architecture that builds the world “out of blocks.”

One of the most nuanced elaborations of the relationship between architecture and the hope-filled, living changefulness that characterizes Stevens’ sense of place occurs in one of the poet’s last works: his 1955 preface to Paul Valéry’s *Eupalinos*. Valéry’s dialogue between Socrates and Phaedrus circles around the difference between “constructing and knowing,” zeroing in especially on architectural questions concerning building and housing (OP 290). Indeed, Valéry’s text highlights these questions not just in its subject matter—in the themes of housing, building, and knowing that the two dead Greeks discuss—but also in its very form. As Stevens is at pains to document (via a letter from Valéry to Paul Souday), *Eupalinos* was “‘made to order’” for the “‘album *Architectures*’” (a “‘collection of engravings and plans’”), and the “‘elastic form of the *dialogue*’” that Valéry adopts in it was determined by the architectural box—“‘115,800 letters’”—into which it was made to fit (OP 292, 291). *Eupalinos* as a text is marked by an interplay of rigidity and elasticity, and in this essential interdependence, as Valéry points out, it is not unlike a Greek temple, for “‘[a]fter all,’” he notes, “‘the sculptors never complained who were obliged to house their Olympian personages inside the obtuse triangle of pediments’” (OP 291).

What James Baird believes Stevens finds in this dialogic sculpture is a shared sensibility, one whose affirmation of an “architecture of the self”—poets are “builders of the self,” Baird notes (7, 27)—conforms to Stevens’ own poetic program. As Baird has it, it is this “human power of shaping”—the act of fabricating the house of selfhood—that Stevens celebrates throughout his writings and that ties his project to that of the architects (8). The question of housing and the house—of what is *housed* in the temples Socrates and Phaedrus discuss or, more generally, of what is housed by such fabrications, architectural or poetic, or of what takes place where there are such places—does indeed orient Stevens’ preface. This is a distinctly architectural question—as Andrew Benjamin has argued, it may constitute *the* question of architecture itself, since, as he puts it, “the *telos* [of architecture understood within its dominant tradition, where it appears as the “last fortress of metaphysics” (Derrida 328)] refers to function and thus to housing. Architecture must house” (289)—and it is a question to which Stevens’ hope-filled sense of place suggests a radical answer.

This answer emerges in a key “rhetorical episode[.]” Stevens introduces at the outset of his preface, one to which he returns frequently in his discussion of Valéry’s ideas (OP 290). In this passage, Socrates is speaking to Phaedrus about the relative value of thinking and acting and, as Stevens points out, “he substitutes for oral exhilaration the exhilaration that comes

from the progression of the mind" (OP 291). A close look at this passage reveals that this is a substitution of one type of housing for another: a housing that shelters the "'divine'" in the static limitations of a "'word born of words'" and one that destroys this box by opening it to the hope and desire provoked by an oncoming futurity made up of the "'pursuits of an indefinable object that infinitely transcends us'" (OP 291). The temple of the word—what Socrates also refers to as the "'realm of thought alone'"—houses the "'God'" in "'the most refined dialectic.'" Such a housing, however, results in an unchanging, eternal return of the same, for, as Socrates points out, "'The God that one so finds is but a word born out of words, and returns to the word'" (OP 291). Socrates is clear on the limitations of an architecture—here, a construction of words and thoughts—understood only as this kind of housing: as, that is to say, the static, enfolding architecture of dialectics and metaphysics, or of a temple that is, once and for all, composed. When we recall Stevens' letter to Hi Simons, it should also be clear why the poet would be drawn to Valéry's depiction of a Socrates who "substitutes" the unfolding architecture of the living act for the enfolding architecture of the dialectical box. For what is housed by this unfolding architecture is never other than the trace of the "'indefinable'" and, hence, a kind of ex-static space alive with the futurity of a program of infinite "'pursuits'": a spacing out of space that, if it can be said to house anything *at all*, houses only the lustrous gap that it promises to and holds open for the "oncoming future" (L 367).

David Farrell Krell has explored this sense of ecstatic spatiality in his book, *Archetecture: Ecstasies of Space, Time, and the Human Body*, in which he outlines an experience of space and place not only based upon the presence secured by the sheltering box—by, that is to say, the traditional understanding of housing, or by an architecture in the service of metaphysics—but based additionally on the kind of spaced out, living, "incessant," and dislocating change and futurity Stevens celebrates in the Simons letter and elsewhere (L 367). Krell writes of an architecture—what he rewrites as *arche-tic-ture*, to stress in the old spelling a "new sense of ecstasy"—that houses its own un-housing and that repeats its own uprootedness: "It would be the place," he notes, "of displacement and *désœuvrement*; it would be the space of atopia and nomadism; it would be the ultimate uncanniness and 'unhomelikeness' of all apparent domesticity" (6, 86). This sense of place as ecstatic spatiality, or as the spac(e)-ing of space, destroys the architectural and metaphysical box by fabricating a living space that cannot be filled, a shelter housing the oncoming "'pursuits'" that characterize its indefinite mobility; a "'mobile edifice'" that, like the music Valéry describes in a passage of what Stevens calls "true poetry," is "'incessantly renewed and reconstructed within itself'"; a space, that is to say, that is essentially *en route* (OP 298). "The temple," Stevens notes in the Simons letter, "is *never quite composed*" (L 367; my emphasis), and, through that small crack of difference opened in this ar-

chitectural site by the “never quite” that it houses, this ecstatic spatiality more or less comes through.

It is to this sense of place that Socrates alludes in the last extended quotation Stevens cites from *Eupalinos*. Using Alain’s words, Stevens characterizes *Eupalinos* as a work fabricated out of a “‘clarity of details,’” and concludes that “[i]n it Valéry made language itself a constructor, until”—and Stevens stresses this interruption—Socrates asks the following questions: “‘What is there more mysterious than clarity? . . . What more capricious than the way in which light and shade are distributed over hours and over men?’” (OP 298). What more uncanny, we might ask, than the ecstatic spatiality—the “hopeful waste” or “portentous lustres,” as the poet has it in the Simons letter—housed by the “never quite composed” Stevensian temple, the house whose program *is* its own discomposing, dislocating *en-routed-ness*, or its hope-filled promise *to* the oncoming and to the future?

Such a program un-boxes the traditional *telos* of architecture and its ties to a metaphysics of presence, ensuring not simply that the temple never quite becomes a finished composition, but that, more radically, it takes place *as* its own ruination, *as* the opening in itself and its own composition, that gives the future a chance. Krell argues that the “truth of architecture is (in) ruins” (58), an observation to which we can imagine Stevens responding with a line from the Simons letter: “This is not pessimism” (L 367). It is interesting to note that in Stevens’ reading of *Eupalinos*, it is Socrates and not Phaedrus (the mouthpiece for the absent Eupalinos) who seems to have the last word: “In the end,” Stevens writes, “Socrates had become the constructor, and if he had, then Valéry had” (OP 297). Eupalinos, in fact, is not quite an architect: he was, as Valéry notes and Stevens recalls, “‘an engineer more than an architect, [who] dug canals and built scarcely any temples’” (OP 292). Yet it is this engineer who talks about how he designs dwellings to house gods and men; temples fabricated, as he says of one example, to enshrine permanently the “‘memory of a bright day in my life,’” or, of another, to reproduce faithfully, in a “‘mathematical image,’” the particular “‘proportions’” of a “‘girl of Corinth’” (OP 295). The engineer builds in order to house or shelter some presence in a particular location, to *box up* the girl or the memory in building blocks of stone: he repeats, that is to say, the traditional *telos* of architecture.

Socrates, on the other hand, never built any houses or temples, but he speculates about what would happen if he were to do so: “‘I shall make mistakes sometimes,’” he muses, “‘and we shall have some ruins’” (OP 297). Socrates would be Stevens’ kind of architect, one who would build *ex-statically* (Eupalinos, Stevens notes, “did not profess to be able to connect up an analysis with an ecstasy” [OP 295]), whose “ruins” would not be pessimistic failures, but hope-filled places alive, as Stevens writes to his friend, with the “oncoming future . . . traceable to a sense of [their] impermanence (the temple is never quite composed)” (L 367). There is

both in Socrates' ruins and in Stevens' writings, then, the outline of an unfolding architecture *of and for the future*: the construction of spaces not of presence but of hope, "space[s] that cannot be filled" (Benjamin 295).

Stevens' sense of place as ecstatic spatiality—as at once bounded space *and* infinite pursuits; enfolding housing *and* unfolding, de-composing acts; rooted-ness *and* constant mobility or *en-routed-ness*—is in line with some contemporary architectural theorists who, like Krell, are interested in re-invigorating an architectural practice they see as too boxed in by its meta-physical *telos*. Andrew Benjamin, for example, in his reading of the works of Peter Eisenman, frames the problem in this fashion: "[W]hat would an architectural thinking be," he writes, "that was no longer dominated by the *telos* given by tradition to architecture?" (289). Eisenman's answer, endorsed by Benjamin, calls for confronting architecture with its essential paradox, such that building would mean opening a site for the continual "interplay between dislocation and location" (294). Eisenman could here be paraphrasing the Stevens of the Simons letter or the *Eupalinos* preface, in which this paradox of architecture finds expression as Stevens' sense of place.

In the works of Bernard Tschumi we find a similar focus on this ecstatic interdependence, one that he characterizes as the "paradoxical relationship between architecture as a product of the mind, as a conceptual and dematerialized discipline, and architecture as the sensual experience of space and as a spatial praxis," or as the disjunction between space built out of blocks ("dead stone") and the dislocating unpredictability of the events that "'happen' in it," an unpredictability that opens a place—one hopes—for what Stevens might characterize as "the oncoming future" (66, 139; L 367). Thus for Tschumi, "architecture is defined as the pleasurable and sometimes violent confrontation of spaces and activities," and for this reason it is "by definition, by nature, *dis-jointed* [and] *dis-sociated*," and by drawing attention to this "unspeakable copulating of live body and dead stone," or by highlighting its "*[p]rogrammatic violence*" (4, 17, 125, 134), architecture responds to its nature as a mobile edifice giving the pleasure Stevens describes in the Simons letter as a "phase of the universal inter-course . . . a [mobile and dislocating] flow ["[c]ross-reflections, modifications, counter-balances, complements"] to and fro between reality and the imagination" (L 368). As Stevens puts it, "[w]e live constantly in the comingling of two reflections, that of the past and that of the future, whirling apart and wide away" (L 367); as Tschumi argues, in a parallel formulation, "no space without event, no architecture without program" (139). It is thus Stevens' sense of place as alive with a dislocating futurity—as the living, hope-filled space that holds a place for the future to come—that underscores the limitations of the conceptual box of presence and metaphysical housing and that makes him the poetic precursor of these contemporary architectural theorists.

It also allies him with his radically thinking contemporary, Frank Lloyd Wright, who shares with Stevens a similar sense of place and futurity. As Gail Satler points out in *Frank Lloyd Wright's Living Space: Architecture's Fourth Dimension*, her sociological reading of the architect's works and texts, Wright was obsessed with ways to destroy the "box" that he felt characterized an undemocratic and inhuman (especially Greek) architecture, one that produced a feeling of entrapment via a hopelessly "static notion of space" (48). Such static boxes made architecture an affair just of enclosed places or enfolding spaces deadly to any oncoming life lived in them. Following Stevens' remark in his "Adagia," "Life is an affair of people not of places. But for me life is an affair of places and *that is the trouble*" (OP 185; my emphasis), we might conclude that Wright's interest in destroying the box gains its force from his sense that the *trouble* with architecture as classically conceived is that it is *only* an affair of housing or of static places, where it should additionally be an affair of people and of the future changefulness of use—of, that is to say, the living space of social relations or of the event. According to Satler, Wright "positioned himself in the problem" posed by the interactions of people and places, a problem that, for him, involved a "commitment to using what existed as the basis from which he could find a solution that moved beyond the idea(l) of the box" and that opened onto an "interpretation of freedom" parallel to what we have seen to be the paradox of architecture: the problem of simultaneously "staying rooted in and moving on," or of holding open a place in the present for the oncoming, for the future (11).

Satler goes on to explore how Wright's definition of "organic architecture"—his insight that the "reality of the building is not in the four walls and roof but in the space enclosed by them *to be lived in*" (*American Architecture* 219; my emphasis)—means that the "space created by building is always a presence, but it is one that continually changes in use and in form, in the sense that the boundaries of interior and exterior may be negotiated" (110). Like the mobile edifice Stevens highlights in his *Eupalinos* preface, Wright's buildings both "sheltered but also encouraged movement, beyond what apparently existed," exposing the architectural problem of constant change and ecstatic spatiality, which Satler reads as the question of "how to enclose without confining," or how to build with a "sense of shelter that does not contain" (54, 63, 115).

In a conclusion that reflects Stevens' comment that the living place is the site of the intersection of the rooted present with the oncoming future, Satler argues that Wright's definition of organic architecture "juxtaposes two tenses . . . the present (is) and the progressive future perfect (to be lived)," and that this paradoxical juxtaposition of *rootedness* and *en-routedness* enables Wright's buildings to be "spaces of memory and spaces of prophecy containing the spirit that makes us alive and the spirit that is life" (109): spaces, that is to say, that *make a place* for a future yet to be. On this point, Wright's sense of living space seems to echo Crispin's "prole-

gomena," the text itself alive with the commingling of "souvenirs and prophecies" (CP 37), and to provide an architectural framework in which Stevens' philosophical observation that "the world is a force, not a presence" begins to make a kind of concrete, material sense (OP 198).

Wright's life-long obsession with destroying the box—whether it be the box of the classical style, the "hideous efflorescent boxing in of humanity upon the Chicago prairies of the '90s," or the box of the International Style skyscrapers he describes as the "triumph of engineering but the defeat of architecture" (*American Architecture* 85; *Autobiography* 546)—in all of its forms, this obsession was bound up with a sense of place that reflects a shared sensibility with Stevens. Wright's many architectural innovations, from his imaginative employment of the cantilever through his open floor plans, his stress on horizontality, and his use of glazing, designed always to insure that "[s]pace may . . . go out or come in where life is being lived," stemmed from his new sense of architecture as mobile, living space, and "in this simple change of thought," he writes in "The Destruction of the Box," "lies the essential of the architectural change from box to free plan and the new reality that is *space* instead of matter" (5, 4).

In analyzing one of Wright's unbuilt projects, the San Marcos-in-the-Desert Hotel that occupied him in the late 1920s, Neil Levine observes that here, as elsewhere, Wright "was seeking a dialectical relation between [the permanent and the impermanent, the rooted and the *en route*], where permanence and impermanence would be functions of each other" (see Fig. 1). The goal of the San Marcos project, Levine concludes, was to "delineate a space for the representation of change" (206), a goal clearly in line with a key element of Stevens' ecstatic sense of place ("there is an exquisite pleasure and harmony in these inter-relations") and with his assertion that, because "change is incessant" and "impermanence" constant, "the temple is never quite composed" (L 368, 367).

Wright's published works return often to the oncoming futurity of this new spatial reality, a space "alive by way of the third dimension," and to

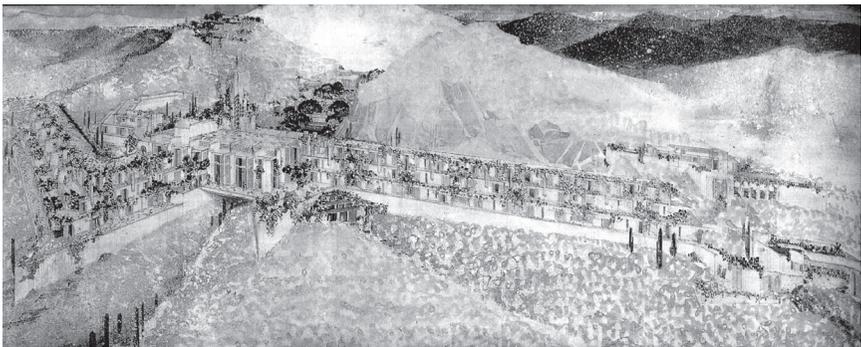


Fig. 1. Perspective of San Marcos-in-the-Desert project, Phoenix South Mountains, Phoenix, Ariz., 1928–29.<sup>1</sup>

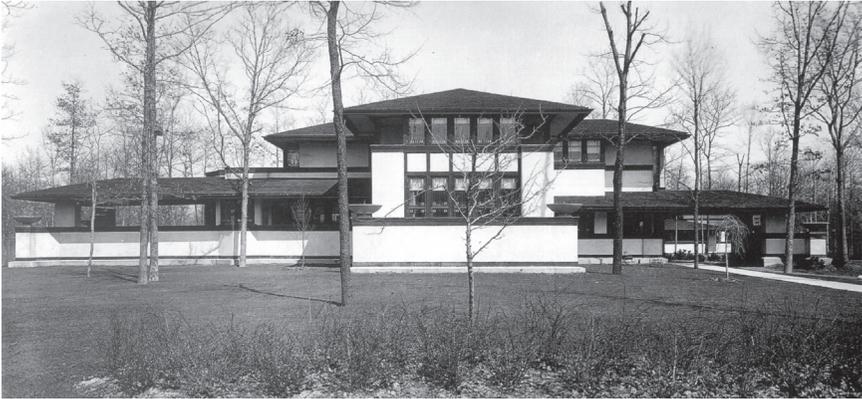


Fig. 2. Exterior photograph of the Willits House, Highland Park, Ill., 1902–03.

the need for an organic architecture that would respond to this new reality by “bear[ing] the message of this liberation of space to space” (*American Architecture* 78, 85). Such an architecture must, in Wright’s view, build a “good platform from which to spring toward the moving infinity that is the present” (23), and in this it echoes the unfolding architecture sketched by the Socrates of *Eupalinos*, for whom the living act is itself a good platform “for the pursuits of an indefinable object that infinitely transcends us’ ” (*OP* 291). The meaning of building for Wright is to be found precisely in this unboxed spatiality that, as Stevens might have it, opens onto the “portentous lustres” of an “oncoming future” (*L* 367), and thus in an architecture—“unfolding,” as Wright puts it, rather than “enfolding” (*American Architecture* 256)—permeated by the paradox of the “shelter that does not contain” or the “space that cannot be filled” (Satler 115; Benjamin 295). “If you refuse this liberated sense of building,” Wright asserts, “haven’t you thrown away that which is most precious in our own human life and most promising as a new field for truly creative artistic expression in architecture?” (“Destruction” 5). Have you not dismissed, in other words, the hopefulness that characterizes Stevens’ ecstatic sense of a place open to the oncoming, and to the future, in the name of the “hopeless waste” of a static world of presence, a world built “out of blocks”? (*L* 367, 368).

Wright’s interest in the interactions of rootedness and mobility can be seen in his earliest buildings and particularly in those houses he designed between 1893 and 1910 that formed the foundation of what became known as Prairie architecture. The details of this architecture are well known, but I want to emphasize two features that speak to the commingling that characterizes Wright’s poetic and Stevensian sense of place: the hearth and the roof. Wright’s Prairie houses are distinguished by the tension between their strong, central masonry fireplaces, which construct a dominating sense of comfort, warmth, and security, and their expansively horizontal hip roofs, cantilevered out over space (see Fig. 2). These roofs give the

sense of being freed from the surface of the earth, or of floating above it in a way that unfolds the houses' space onto the openendedness of the prairie beyond. As Gevork Hartoonian points out, "All of Wright's work demonstrated his interest in the existential depth of the relationship between being and place," a "polar tension" graphically demonstrated in, for example, the Ward Willits house, which Hartoonian describes as summoning the "basic sensation of place, as if a nomad were experiencing it," its cross axis plan functioning as a device for "orientation" and "settlement" and, at the same time, for "departure" (58, 59).

This tension between settlement and nomadism is most notably illustrated in Wright's Robie House, perhaps the most famous example of Prairie architecture (see Fig. 3). Here, the rootedness implied by the powerful central hearth and chimney is most dynamically counter-balanced by its opposite, the unfolding sense of "dispersion" and mobility implicit in its dramatically cantilevered roofs. Hartoonian notes that in the Robie House "Wright makes an attempt to fasten the flying roofs to the earth," and concludes that the "masonry chimney and the floating roof connote two primitive instincts: one of mobility and the other of security" (59), the very components of the interplay and interaction Stevens describes in the Simons letter. Wright's modernity, like Stevens', resides in the cross-reflections and counter-balances that make up this paradoxical sense of place, and that outline what Hilde Heynen describes as a distinctly modern sense



Fig. 3. Exterior photograph of the Robie House, Chicago, Ill., 1908–10.

of dwelling. In what is nearly a direct quotation of the Socrates of Valéry and Stevens, Heynen writes that “dwelling,” which is “continually permeated by its opposite,” means the “permanent quest for an ever-new enclosure, because no dwelling can be more than momentary at present.” In this modern sense, then, of a place permeated by living futurity and change, dwelling “stands as well for the pastoral image of the *Heimat* [home] where one belongs, and for the transitoriness that in a modern condition inevitably marks this belonging” (223). Here, then, Heynen’s existential version of Stevens’ “celestial ennui of apartments” (CP 381) reflects both the nomadism of the poet’s words and the ecstatic spatiality—the sense of “dwelling” as both rooted in place and energetically *en route*, or the experience of being both sheltered and exposed to a living, oncoming futurity—materialized by the works of the Prairie architect.

Wright’s Arizona home and studio, Taliesin West (begun in 1938), is perhaps his most vivid articulation of this sense of place. Described by his wife as looking like “something we had been excavating, not building,” Taliesin West employs the construction technique of “‘desert rubble stone’ walls” that, as Levine observes, “reminds one of ‘restored’ portions of masonry at archaeological sites” (*Autobiography* 454; Levine 295) (see Fig. 4). It looks, in other words, like a “recycled, reconstructed ruin,” and as such



Fig. 4. Exterior photograph of Taliesin West, Scottsdale, Ariz., begun in 1938.

it stands at the dynamic intersection of place and time, enfolding shelter and unfolding change, as a building “never quite composed” (L 367). Levine reads Taliesin West in this sense and against a romantic understanding of the ruin, which “stressed the melancholic aspect of nature’s victory over culture, of time overcoming human history” (296). This romantic melancholy, tied to a sense of a place seen only as *ruined* by incessant change, is precisely the “pessimism” Stevens himself associates with the romanticization of the past that he dismisses in the Simons letter.

But for Wright, as for Stevens, change is the very spirit and life of place—“the law of organic change,” he writes in *An Organic Architecture*, “is the only thing that mankind can know as beneficent or as actual!” (*American Architecture* 45)—and thus, as Levine points out, Wright “understood the ruin” in a “plastic [and “fluid”] way” (296) and built Taliesin West to symbolize his Heraclitean sense that “[w]e can only know that all things are in process of flowing in some continuous state of becoming” (*American Architecture* 45). Because Wright’s “ruin” marks the commingling of “nature and culture” and manifests the “transition from the one state to the other,” it is an architecture that makes it “hard to tell where nature leaves off and history [or building] begins,” and that therefore materializes the flowing “modifications” and destabilizing interchanges of reality and imagination—the “world about us” and the “world within us,” as Stevens writes in “The Relations between Poetry and Painting”—that energize the poet’s sense of place and that give him such pleasure (Levine 296; NA 169). Taliesin West thus articulates Wright’s law of organic change and reflects the paradoxes of an architecture that at once enfolds and unfolds and that thereby responds to a modern—and very Stevensian—sense of dwelling. In it Wright seeks to release architecture from its metaphysical box and to build an architecture *of and for the future*: to construct places, like those Stevens writes of, for the future to come.

Indeed, Wright’s architectural efforts to destroy the box and to open space to the oncoming future are echoed in many of Stevens’ poems, from the “portentous lustres” of the ruined St. Armorer’s “cindery noes,” through the “Space-filled . . . unnamed flowing” of “The River of Rivers in Connecticut” (whose “gayety” of sounds remains to be read alongside Wright’s masterpiece, *Fallingwater*), to the “residuum” of New Haven on an ordinary evening, itself a kind of “‘grand wreckage,’” as Wright once wrote, “‘left by [the] tremendous energy poured forth by man in quest of his ideal’ ” (*CP* 529, 533, 479; quoted in Levine 296). When Stevens writes in the “Adagia” of his wish to “live in the world but outside of existing conceptions of it” (*OP* 190), we hear the same desire for freedom and the same architectural paradox—to build spaces or to write poems that cannot be filled and to inhabit there the problem of people and places, of *at once* enfolding shelter and unfolding, living event—materialized by Wright’s houses (see Fig. 5). As Grant Hildebrand has noted, in Wright’s work “there is a sense that spaces lie beyond spaces . . . the phenomenon

of distant spaces suggested but not immediately revealed" (90, 91). This architectural release of boxed-in space to an unspecified "beyond," or to a future space (a space *for* the future) that, as "more or less" free to appear, is never a matter of "immediate revelation," parallels the destruction of the conceptual box Stevens emphasizes in "The Relations between Poetry and Painting," where his analysis of the "similarities of sensibility" between the poet and the painter reflects a similar sharing between the poet and the architect. Observing that the "[p]oet and painter alike live and work in the midst of a generation that is experiencing essential poverty in spite of fortune"—an analysis of modernity with which Wright would completely agree—Stevens sounds the same optimistic note rung by Wright's released space, a note alive with the futurity of living change:

The extension of the mind beyond the range of the mind, the projection of reality beyond reality, the determination to cover the ground, whatever it may be, the determination not to be confined, the recapture of excitement and intensity of interest, the enlargement of the spirit at every time, in every way, these are the unities, the relations, to be summarized as paramount now. (NA 171)

Places promised to this unspecified "beyond"; places that open a space *in* the present—in presence *itself*—for the oncoming future; places dedicated to an excessive "enlargement" that, "at every time," projects the spirit beyond its rooted self: these are the places that build the closure of the meta-



Fig. 5. Interior photograph of the Ennis House, Los Angeles, Calif., 1923–24.

physical box and that constitute the living, hope-filled places of Wallace Stevens and Frank Lloyd Wright.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Figures 1 through 4 are from Neil Levine, *The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright*, 190, 32, 52, and 254, respectively. Figure 5 is from Grant Hildebrand, *The Wright Space: Pattern & Meaning in Frank Lloyd Wright's Houses*, 90.

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# Family and Place in Wallace Stevens

JUSTIN QUINN

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

—Wallace Stevens

WHAT IS THE MEANING of the Pennsylvania and New Jersey place names that appear in Wallace Stevens' lyrics of the mid-1940s? I believe they constitute an index of an important shift in Stevens' thinking, one often overlooked by readers. Critics such as Milton J. Bates and Thomas Lombardi have discussed these place names, but they do not go far enough in showing how Stevens' poetry from the mid-1940s on works to rectify the "trouble" Stevens himself referred to in the above epigraph: life should be an affair of people, but for Stevens, at least early in his poetic career, it was more one of places. The poems from the mid-1940s on, charged by Stevens' newly found interest in genealogy, mark a change in the way Stevens viewed the imagination, an alteration that allowed him to connect people and places.

In earlier poems, despite its vicissitudes, the imagination has no genealogy: its grandeurs and nadirs are of its own making; it owes nothing to past generations; if strong enough, it has the power to recreate the world; it would seem to have sprung, like Jay Gatsby, "from his Platonic conception of himself" (Fitzgerald 95). But in the phase of his career after the writing of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" (1942), such an Emersonian conception of the imagination is abandoned, and in its place there is an awareness of the imagination as *scion*, that is, as the product of many generations that have dwelled in specific places. Moreover, contrary to the pervasive Emersonian prejudice, this awareness is figured in the poetry as an access to clear vision and imaginative power, Stevens' two great desiderata. It is little wonder that this shift has gone unnoticed, as such a conception of imaginative inheritance and maturity goes against deeply held beliefs of self-determination that are integral to U.S. democratic ideology (and indeed that are increasingly to be found in Anglophone countries and Europe). For Stevens, the production of imaginative nobility begins to resemble the production of nobility in feudal Europe rather than

that of the “natural nobility” promoted by American writers as diverse as Walt Whitman and Henry James.

Bates holds that Stevens’ genealogical studies confirmed rather than challenged his conception of the imagination and reality:

Along with physique and temperament, Stevens believed that he had inherited certain of his poetic preoccupations. His “reality-imagination complex” was, he asserted in 1953, uniquely his own. But it was also a latter-day version of complementary instincts which had informed his ancestors’ lives—their belief in God and their attachment to the soil. (283)

He goes on to assert that Stevens’ ancestors, and especially the figure of his maternal grandfather, “moved Stevens to project a supreme fiction or central poem in the forties and fifties” (285). But this will not do, as Stevens drops nearly all talk of supreme fictions after 1942, and in its place, as I will show, there is a more circumspect filial piety toward tradition and the past. Alan Filreis comes closer to an awareness of the importance of the shift (“genealogy offered him not only a lesson in the content of these centuries-old political disputes, but also taught him a method of unraveling positions within positions” [123]), but Filreis’ emphasis on the connections between the poetry and politics means that he dwells only on the implications of the interest for Stevens’ thinking about World War II.

Since this idea—that respect for family tradition and place is the way to a clear perception of the world—is uncommon, it must be stressed that such filial piety is in no way an instance of imaginative cowardice or dependence, but it is for Stevens the imagination’s very ennobling and empowerment. Of course, Stevens’ interest in his genealogy began with the more mundane desire to join a prestigious New York society. In a letter to his genealogist, Lila James Roney, he writes:

Recently, I joined the St. Nicholas Society on the basis of your material, but it is the Holland Society that I particularly want, because, when I start to talk about being descended from the first white child born in New Netherland, people who wouldn’t believe it otherwise would believe it if I could say that I was a member of the Holland Society. You wouldn’t think that it would make the slightest difference, but people are that way. (L 472)

The mincing snobbery of this is transformed into something more celebratory in the poems, but the motive remains. Stevens was proud of his ancestry and wished to publish the fact, both to acquaintances and in his poetry. It brings to mind W. B. Yeats’s aristocratic pretensions in the second half of his career. But whereas the Irish poet’s interest in his gene-

alogy combined with plans for the spiritual and cultural transformation of Ireland, in Stevens, as I will show, the assertion of family and tradition has the effect of going against the American grain of individualism and self-reliance.

When Yeats writes "Under Ben Bulben," he locates himself in a region that many of his preceding poems have mapped out imaginatively, connecting it not only with his family history but also with the fate of Ireland in general. Stevens' references to Tinicum, Cohansey, Tulpehocken, and the Perkiomen Creek have a very different effect. These places are not charged with the same national valency as the plateau in County Sligo; in fact, their very lack of grand significance seems to have been part of the motivation for their choice. Looking at the letters, we can obtain glosses on them, and these are excellently supplemented by Bates (277–91). We learn that when tracing his genealogy in the period, Stevens discovered that his ancestors lived in some of these places. Other places are even more immediate: for instance, of the Perkiomen Creek he remarked: "It almost accounts to a genealogical fact that all his life long my father used to fish in Perkiomen for bass, and this can only mean that he did it as a boy" (*SP* 5). Once we know this, and once we know of Stevens' troubled relationship with his father, the poem's emotional charge is greatly increased.

Yet it is hard not to suspect that he was uninterested in such an effect: if he had been why did he not make the connection between his father and the stream more obvious? It seems unlikely that he wished to lead the reader on a paper chase for the fact. In February 1942, just before he embarked on these poems, he gave his opinion on poetic obscurity to Hi Simons:

Sometimes, when I am writing a thing, it is complete in my own mind; I write it in my own way and don't care what happens. I don't mean to say that I am deliberately obscure, but I do mean to say that, when the thing has been put down and is complete to my own way of thinking, I let it go. After all, if the thing is really there, the reader gets it. He may not get it at once, but, if he is sufficiently interested, he invariably gets it. (*L* 403)

"[S]ufficiently interested" probably does not stretch to *Souvenirs and Prophecies*, from which I took the reference to his father—that is, to scholarly interest. But it probably does stretch to knowing that Stevens was from Pennsylvania and to inferring from this that the place names had a family resonance for him. Then the reader begins to "get it." He or she will be ushered further in this direction by the many references to both family relations and the passage of generations in these poems. (Bates remarks on the increased use of familial terms in this period [277 ff.] )

The first important poem of this phase is “Dutch Graves in Bucks County” (1943), and in it he marks the distance between the past generations and the present moment. The Dutch ancestors in the ground “are crusts that lie / In the shrivellings of your time and place” (*CP* 291) and Stevens tells them that “your children / Are not your children” (*CP* 292). This is the most heartbreaking consequence of emigration—the breakdown in the transmission of culture and language. Stevens addresses them throughout the poem as his “semblables,” and it is hard not to recall his own difficulties with his daughter at that time. Writing to his sister in October 1942, Stevens takes stock of Holly’s growing distance from him and his family, even while he expresses an understanding of it:

My family means nothing to her. This is hard to realize, but it is so. The lovely country round Reading and all the interesting people and places that you and I have known and which we might well think that she would enjoy, just don’t exist for her. And this is all the more so because Elsie never speaks of Reading except to mention one or two of her aunts occasionally. Holly is even drifting away pretty completely from Elsie. Since this is something which we cannot possibly control, the only thing to do is to accustom ourselves to the idea. But then, I felt exactly the same way when I was her age; I took the family for granted and I spent my time looking forward and about me. (*L* 421)

Holly herself when editing the letters suggests that her break with her parents was one of the reasons for his interest in genealogy (*L* 398). Almost a year to the day later he writes to Hi Simons about his interest in it:

This was a subject that I scorned when I was a boy. However, there has become a part of it something that was beyond me then and that is the desire to realize the past as it was. At the moment I am reading a history of the early settlements which in a perfectly effortless way recreates the political tensions and the business activity of the 17th century in this country. This is an extraordinary experience, and the whole thing has been an extraordinary experience: finding out about my family, etc. It is extraordinary how little seems to have survived when you first begin to study this sort of thing and then later on, when you have learned how to go about it, what an immense amount has survived and how much you can make of it. Only, to make anything of it, is an occupation in itself. (*L* 457)

In this context “Dutch Graves in Bucks County,” although first published in 1943, belongs to the first period of genealogical research as Stevens describes it. It is as if the attainment of the second phase had not yet pen-

etrated Stevens' poetic imagination—the poems resulting from that would follow soon.

In the meantime, "So-And-So Reclining on Her Couch" examines the advertising spectacle of a woman who would seem to have been born "at twenty-one, / Without lineage or language, only / The curving of her hip" (CP 295). Just as *The Great Gatsby* in part hinges on the revelation of Gatsby's true past with the arrival of his father at the end of the book, so does Stevens' poem reveal both the lineage and language of the apparitional beauty that floats before his eyes. Waving her away dismissively at the end, he says: "Good-bye, / Mrs. Pappadopoulos, and thanks" (CP 296). Given the stately philosophical rhetoric of the rest of the poem, it is clear that Stevens has chosen the multisyllabic Greek name for comic effect: her ethnic background, which either she or the advertisers had endeavored to erase, cannot be suppressed. The poem, although it amounts to little more than a comic fillip, marks a movement away from the position of the sten-torian "Dutch Graves in Bucks County": Mrs. Pappadopoulos, much as she would wish it, cannot prevent the past from being part of the present.

Lineage and language are exactly what the speaker of "Debris of Life and Mind" desires most: "There is so little that is close and warm. / It is as if we were never children" (CP 338). In this absence he imagines a maternal figure who comes forth to console him and to reassure him about himself and the things of the world. She is referred to in the third person throughout the brief lyric, and this makes the last line so poignant when he turns to address her directly: "Stay here. Speak of familiar things a while" (CP 338). The knot of meanings in the word "familiar" is particularly evocative: in one sense these things are the objects we know best; in another, they pertain to one's family or household. Writing to Emma Stevens Jobbins in 1944, he joked: "It is such a pleasure for me to hear from you. In the autumn I badly need my mother, or something. This has always been the toughest time of the year for me" (L 473). Through the joke shimmers something of the feeling of "Debris of Life and Mind"—after all, it is a strange way for a man of sixty-five to begin a letter to a relation.

In the same year he published "Esthétique du Mal"; in section V he stresses the need for family as an antidote in part to evil:

Softly let all true sympathizers come,  
Without the inventions of sorrow or the sob  
Beyond invention. 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  
And these regalia, these things disclosed,

These nebulous brilliancies in the smallest look  
Of the being's deepest darling, we forego  
Lament, willingly forfeit the ai-ai. (CP 317)

What is "close and warm" in "Debris of Life and Mind" is present again in the "familiar things" of "the actual, the warm, the near." Also of note is the way Stevens figures such intimacy as access to the real: there are the aforementioned "actual" and the disclosure later on in the passage. (Ideas of "disclosure" are important to Stevens in this period and the word occurs repeatedly in the poems.) Section XIII begins with fathers and sons and considers the central role of lineage in the conception and perception of the world. One follows the other and each in his being is unalterable. Stevens glosses thus:

This force of nature in action is the major  
Tragedy. This is destiny unperplexed,  
The happiest enemy. And it may be  
That in his Mediterranean cloister a man,  
Reclining, eased of desire, establishes  
The visible, a zone of blue and orange  
Versicolorings, establishes a time  
To watch the fire-feinting sea and calls it good,  
The ultimate good, sure of a reality  
Of the longest meditation, the maximum,  
The assassin's scene. Evil in evil is  
Comparative. The assassin discloses himself,  
The force that destroys us is disclosed, within  
This maximum, an adventure to be endured  
With the politest helplessness. Ay-mi!  
One feels its action moving in the blood. (CP 324)

The man reclining in the Mediterranean cloister is some relation to Mrs. Pappadopoulos: the tone seems to imply that it is all very well for some expatriate meditating in a cloister away from home and family (viz., the figure of section I), engaged in such activities as "establish[ing] / The visible." But to those who remain at home and aware of their place in the generations, a grimmer fate awaits. Here Stevens explores the meaning of "familiar" as enemy or assassin, but for all the inimical nature of this figure, it is clear that approbation is reserved for those who confront the disclosure of the assassin. The "blood" of the last line is at once the liquid and the lineage of the individual. One feels one's father moving in one's blood.

From family he moves outward to social organization in section XIV, and then there is the final section, XV, "The greatest poverty is not to live / In the physical world" (CP 325). In the overall context of the poem, the

“familiar disclosures” of earlier sections enable access to the physical world in section XV. If one does not feel the action of generations “moving in the blood,” then one cannot “get at” the experience of the physical world that is so beautifully evoked in the final section.

Perhaps,  
After death, the non-physical people, in paradise,  
Itself non-physical, may, by chance, observe  
The green corn gleaming and experience  
The minor of what we feel. The adventurer  
In humanity has not conceived of a race  
Completely physical in a physical world.  
The green corn gleams and the metaphysicals  
Lie sprawling in majors of the August heat,  
The rotund emotions, paradise unknown.  
This is the thesis scrivenered in delight,  
The reverberating psalm, the right chorale. (*CP* 325–26)

The ghosts of past generations here are like those of “Large Red Man Reading” who come back down to earth. That Stevens wishes us to connect the passage with “familiar things” is clear from his mention of the “adventurer,” which reminds us of the “adventure to be endured” (*CP* 324) of section XIII. That we can never perceive the world in a purely physical way is put down to the fact that in our blood the non-physical people still move, so that when we look over the gleaming corn they seem to lie there as part of it. We should attend to the movement of approbation in the passage. Rather than supposing that the presence of the dead generations in vision is harmful or limiting, in the last two lines above he celebrates them joyously.

Confirmation of the importance of family figures to clear vision is provided by “The Bed of Old John Zeller,” which follows immediately in the *Collected Poems*. The first tercet picks up the theme of evil and “ghostly sequences” of the generations. One might get frustrated that one’s vision of the world is conditioned by one’s ancestors and this might push one to imagine a different lineage. If one feels thus, then one begins to think,

It is easy to wish for another structure  
Of ideas and to say as usual that there must be  
Other ghostly sequences and, it would be, luminous

Sequences, thought of among spheres in the old peak of night:  
This is the habit of wishing, as if one’s grandfather lay  
In one’s heart and wished as he had always wished, unable

To sleep in that bed for its disorder, talking of ghostly

Sequences that would be sleep and ting-tang tossing, so that  
He might slowly forget. It is more difficult to evade

That habit of wishing and to accept the structure  
Of things as the structure of ideas. It was the structure  
Of things at least that was thought of in the old peak of night.  
(CP 326–27)

John Zeller (1809–1862), Stevens' maternal grandfather, was born in Berks County and died in Reading (*L* 416), and here he calls his grandson away from mere invention of supreme fictions to the hard work of the recognition of reality. The recommendation is that the "structure of ideas" should "accept the structure / Of things," and this clearly demotes the action of the sovereign imagination in its projection of supreme fictions in favor of the disclosure of reality. One must "feel[] its action moving in the blood" to reach such a disclosure, as we saw in "Esthétique du Mal." Although this is hardly one of Stevens' most impressive poems, it serves as a valuable index to what is going on in a more important work such as "Credences of Summer."

But before approaching "Credences of Summer," I would like to give a few other indexes to the themes of family and tradition and occasionally place. "The Lack of Repose" makes further "intense disclosures" (*CP* 303) encouraged by an awareness of the passage of generations and sees these proleptically rather than retrospectively. The speaker imagines his grandson some time in the future taking strength and understanding from the book he has yet to write. Such praise of lineage is the corollary of "So-And-So Reclining on Her Couch." Similarly, "Sketch of the Ultimate Politician" dwells on "Words that come out of us like words within, / That have rankled for many lives and made no sound" (*CP* 336), which, when spoken by this figure, create the land in which the community will soon live. This catches the creative and optimistic energy that results from a full recognition of the past. Because he is so deeply aware of the generations of the people and their traditions, the ultimate politician is able to project change and renewal.

"Somnambulisma" considers the different metaphors for the sea of successive generations. The syntax is complex, but through negative implication the poem finally asserts the desideratum of a connection between a people and their place through the mediation of a scholar figure. Once again, integral to this resolution is an awareness of the past and future images of the sea and, by extension, the generations of people who created those images. "Wild Ducks, People and Distances" expresses something of the claustrophobia of the connection between the community and the land ("We grew used so soon, too soon, to earth itself" [*CP* 328]). We might have wished for the easy option outlined in "The Bed of Old John Zeller" ("Did we expect to live in other lives?" [*CP* 328]), but the poem

ends by affirming the value of the villages: there remains a distance between us and where we live, but to close that gap would be fatal.

Locating himself back in Pennsylvania in "Late Hymn from the Myrrh-Mountain," Stevens experiences an amorous moment of nearness with the external world—the distance of "Wild Ducks, People and Distances" closed a little, but not entirely. There is no reference to past generations here, but it is of note that such an episode of proximity with the natural world should take place in the landscape of Stevens' childhood and in the country where his family lived for many generations. We will encounter such a nexus again in canto IV of "Credences of Summer."

"Thinking of a Relation between the Images of Metaphors" is concerned with another accord with reality through parentalism, that is, ceremonious acknowledgment of a parent. Stevens' father, fishing in the Perkiomen Creek, provides a further "disclosure": "State the disclosure. In that one eye the dove / Might spring to sight and yet remain a dove. / The fisherman might be the single man / In whose breast, the dove, alighting, would grow still" (*CP* 357). This access to vision is mediated by the figure of Stevens' father as a child. It is an atonement between the eye of the father and also between father and son, as the poet-son catches sight of his father's "accord with reality" (*L* 719).

One would suppose that "A Completely New Set of Objects" would result from ignoring ancestors, but Stevens turns this supposition on its head:

From a Schuylkill in mid-earth there came emerging  
Flotillas, willed and wanted, bearing in them

Shadows of friends, of those he knew, each bringing  
From the water in which he believed and out of desire

Things made by mid-terrestrial, mid-human  
Makers without knowing, or intending, uses.

These figures verdant with time's buried verdure  
Came paddling their canoes, a thousand thousand,

Carrying such shapes, of such alleviation,  
That the beholder knew their subtle purpose,

Knew well the shapes were the exactest shaping  
Of a vast people old in meditation . . .

Under Tinicum or small Cohansey,  
The fathers of the makers may lie and weather. (*CP* 353)

Regarding the place names in the penultimate line, Bates comments that "Stevens had sought information regarding his father's side of the family in these cemeteries" (290). What seems at first like a surreal procession turns out to be based on a memory of similar events on the Schuylkill in Reading, Pennsylvania. In "The Reading That Stevens Remembered," Donald Shenton, in the Wallace Stevens Memorial Issue of the *Historical Review of Berks County*, offers this gloss:

In 1897 the Schuylkill had been damned at frequent intervals to provide a channel deep enough for boats of the Schuylkill Canal, which carried coal from the north to Philadelphia. Thus the river had impressive breadth. Then annual festivals were held on this broad river, down which paraded canoes and boats lighted at night with canded Chinese lanterns. Oldsters, remembering these festivals, will enjoy "A Completely New Set of Objects," as they envision with Stevens the lighted canoes emerging from the curtain of night as if "from mid-earth"—first the light, then the dim shape of canoes, then the faces of old friends reappearing out of the night of memory. (108)

Stevens extends this memory to say that the people emerge from mid-earth, making them an autochthonous community, *of* the place they reside in. These figures instead of restricting our apprehension of the world enlarge it—only by attending to a community's traditions will one come to know that community's place. The tone of this, intimate and affectionate, could not be further removed from that of "Dutch Graves in Bucks County" written three years before. Neither is there any suggestion of a supreme fiction. The speaker is carrying out his loving and dutiful parentalism: he is a "beholder," not a projector of some grand plan. Here is the sense of harmony referred to at the end of "Extraordinary References," which is set in Tulpehocken, where his mother's family once lived: "In the inherited garden, a second-hand / Vertumnus creates an equilibrium" (CP 369).

Primed by such readings, our awareness of a poem such as "The Red Fern" is transformed, and we see how deeply Stevens' genealogical research has changed his imagination and how deeply it is the vision of a lyric subject that is embedded in the levels of generation rather than the pastless Emersonian individual:

The large-leaved day grows rapidly,  
And opens in this familiar spot  
Its unfamiliar, difficult fern,  
Pushing and pushing red after red.

There are doubles of this fern in clouds,  
Less firm than the paternal flame,

Yet drenched with its identity,  
Reflections and off-shoots, mimic-motes

And mist-mites, dangling seconds, grown  
Beyond relation to the parent trunk:  
The dazzling, bulging, brightest core,  
The furiously burning father-fire . . .

Infant, it is enough in life  
To speak of what you see. But wait  
Until sight wakens the sleepy eye  
And pierces the physical fix of things. (*CP* 365)

That the clouds are “Less firm” than the fern is an ingenious rhyme. But even more impressive is the way that Stevens throws open the scope of the poem in the last verse, so that observation of the fern becomes a parable embracing the generations of men as well as that of the fern. The infant, in his relation to the fatherly figure that addresses him, is one of those “Reflections and off-shoots, mimic-motes.” The implication is that a person cannot pierce the physical fix of things until he or she learns to see through such “familiar” resemblances.

The last stanza thus contrasts two types of vision: the first a childish inventory of the objects of the world, the second a much more penetrating and vivid view, and the verve of this second is conveyed on a phonetic level by the effervescence of the words “physical fix.” But of course this is not just an awareness of resemblances in the world—if that were all, then the individual imagination would be capable of that—but rather it is an awareness that one is also a reflection or off-shoot from the “furiously burning father-fire”; in other words, that one is a scion and sees in that way.

On the face of it, “Credences of Summer” contains passages that would seem to contradict such filial piety. The exultant, aggressive tone of canto II is very close to Emerson’s in his more expansive moods. Stevens exclaims:

Let’s see the very thing and nothing else.  
Let’s see it with the hottest fire of sight.  
Burn everything not part of it to ash. (*CP* 373)

But now we begin to realize that Stevens’ access to reality in such moments, rather than depending on the abandonment of the ties of family and intimate acquaintance, depends on them and acknowledges their importance. How else should we understand canto I, especially its last verse?

There is nothing more inscribed nor thought nor felt  
And this must comfort the heart’s core against

Its false disasters—these fathers standing round,  
These mothers touching, speaking, being near,  
These lovers waiting in the soft dry grass. (CP 372)

Stevens has moved from the consideration of the great masses of men that preoccupied him through the 1930s into the early 1940s to a consideration of community, with its ceremonies, family ties, and transmission of cultural and ethical values. Great masses of men possess none of these attributes: the very phrase conjures up populations that have no cultural or ethical values but those the radio and newspapers give them; they are populations of individual economic units without brothers, sisters, parents, lovers, without the ability to apprehend the kind of negotiations with the sun, the moon, the mountains, and the sea that the poet conducts.

In the passage above and indeed in the poem in general, Stevens is able to give a sense of large numbers of people caught up in the cycle of birth, love, and death, but also in something of the warmth and intensity of the human emotions that cathect this process. Observe the last three lines: the fathers stand around sternly as though posing for a family photograph; the mothers with their tenderness break this mood as they touch, speak, and simply draw near; and the description of the lovers conveys the *luxus* and lyricism of young love. These emotions are registered but also placed against the larger backdrop of the generational cycles of the community. Each element of this picture has a social role—these are the “*personae*” mentioned in the last section of the poem.

Confirming this reading is the setting of canto IV in Oley:

One of the limits of reality  
Presents itself in Oley when the hay,  
Baked through long days, is piled in mows. It is  
A land too ripe for enigmas, too serene.  
There the distant fails the clairvoyant eye

And the secondary senses of the ear  
Swarm, not with secondary sounds, but choirs,  
Not evocations but last choirs, last sounds  
With nothing else compounded, carried full,  
Pure rhetoric of a language without words.

Things stop in that direction and since they stop  
The direction stops and we accept what is  
As good. The utmost must be good and is  
And is our fortune and honey hived in the trees  
And mingling of colors at a festival.

This landscape has already been woven through with social meaning by the generations of the people who have lived there: the “secondary sounds” that are to be heard in Oley are those of the choirs of the community whose songs have become part of the place. That Stevens had this socio-historical aspect of the landscape in mind is confirmed by his letter to Charles Tomlinson when he comments:

Oley (Óly), by the way, is a region in eastern Pennsylvania. It is a valley full of farms which was settled in part by Huguenots in the 17th Century. An accord with realities is the nature of things there. (*L* 719)

When we know these things, the lines, “One of the limits of reality / Presents itself in Oley,” take on a special resonance. The enjambment here is important: the first line trumpets the abstract metaphysics of his reality/imagination complex, but the place name specificity of the second line completely qualifies this. This is a bizarre jump. Usually such philosophical talk is universal, its propositions true from Boston to Bombay. But with no hesitation Stevens points to one particular place on the earth where this is more true.

The point does not need to be labored in a detailed reading of the succeeding cantos: V talks of “kin,” the “land’s children,” and the “vital son,” and when VI has the speakers (for it is voiced throughout by a group of people) standing “On this present ground . . . / Things certain sustaining us in certainty” (*CP* 375), there can be little doubt that these are the “familiar things” of the preceding cantos. That canto VII switches to the third-person plural indicates the turn away from community that the poem will finally take, but for the moment canto VIII merely amplifies what has come before. It describes generation as “ten thousand tumblers tumbling down / To share the day” (*CP* 376–77), and there is perhaps no better gloss on this than Jorie Graham’s “Self-Portrait as the Gesture Between Them [Adam and Eve],” which describes the birth of a child thus:

32

where the complex mechanism fails, where the stranger  
appears in the clearing,

33

out of nowhere and uncalled for, out of nowhere to share the  
day. (8)

Talk of a complex mechanism failing draws on canto IX also, where “A complex of emotions falls apart,” and more particularly: “The gardener’s cat is dead, the gardener gone / And last year’s garden grows salacious weeds” (*CP* 377). One is reminded of the second-hand garden of the gen-

erations in "Extraordinary References." Stevens is clearly registering his own distance from the place where his ancestors had lived for generations—after all, he did not continue to live in Reading, and at that point it would have seemed that the transmission of family values to his daughter was unsuccessful (viz., L 421). Yes, he might try to make an accord with John Zeller, but canto IX shows that he did not suppose that he did not see the difficulty of it. Another "complex of emotions" arises, "not / So soft, so civil" (CP 377).

The last canto is the hardest to assess:

The personae of summer play the characters  
Of an inhuman author, who meditates  
With the gold bugs, in blue meadows, late at night.  
He does not hear his characters talk. He sees  
Them mottled, in the moodiest costumes,

Of blue and yellow, sky and sun, belted  
And knotted, sashed and seamed, half pales of red,  
Half pales of green, appropriate habit for  
The huge decorum, the manner of the time,  
Part of the mottled mood of summer's whole,

In which the characters speak because they want  
To speak, the fat, the roseate characters,  
Free, for a moment, from malice and sudden cry,  
Complete in a completed scene, speaking  
Their parts as in a youthful happiness. (CP 377-78)

This is one of the most beautiful paeans to nostalgia. It expresses the great need we have for our past—all the rich emotional lusters that never seem to be equaled in adult life—and simultaneously says good-bye to the past, since it is "Complete in a completed scene." "Credences of Summer" would seem to have been one of the last poems of *Transport to Summer* to be written. (Stevens sent "Credences of Summer," freshly written, out for publication on 23 July 1946 [L 530], and on 12 November 1946, he sent the proofs for *Transport to Summer* back to Knopf; in the *Letters of Wallace Stevens* there is no reference to any other poems in the intervening period.)

The "complet[ion]" referred to here would also seem to refer in part to his attitude toward genealogy in the poetry. Although it would not play such a prominent role in the poetry to come, its lesson had been learned. He would not return to the kind of Emersonian exultation that informs even a work as recent as "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction"; he would remain attentive to the significance of lineage (viz., canto II of "The Auras of Autumn"); and in general, he would become more attuned to and interested in the way that communities envision the world, rather than

the way the individual does (viz., canto V of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven"). The poems of *The Rock* also possess all the humility of the scion. When the connection with the past becomes tenuous, as in the beginning of the title poem of that group, and we believe "It is an illusion that we were ever alive" (CP 525), we are restored by the story of generation in the figure of the mango tree and its fruit: "This is the cure / Of leaves and of the ground and of ourselves" (CP 527).

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# Wallace Stevens' "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven": The "Inescapable Romance" of Place

KEITH MANECKE

*The greatest poverty is not to live  
In a physical world. . . .*  
—"Esthétique du Mal"

## I

MUCH CRITICISM IN THE LAST decade, including that by James Longenbach and Alan Filreis, has emphasized the importance of the social, historical, and political facets of the external world to Wallace Stevens' poetry, working against the deeply entrenched view of Stevens as the supreme poet of the imagination. Despite these valuable critical contributions, the attitude persists that Stevens' poetic voice becomes increasingly detached from the concerns of the external world in his later work, particularly during the 1940s and early 1950s. After all, no argument can dismiss the fact that the first dictum in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" is "It Must Be Abstract," while the charge that "It Must Adhere to the Real," or "It Must Reflect Its Historical Situation," is noticeably absent.

The works that have become most representative of this late period in Stevens' work—"Esthétique du Mal," "Credences of Summer," "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," "The Auroras of Autumn," and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven"—demonstrate the poet's mastery of the long, meditative poem and its possibilities for extended, abstract musings on the relationship between poetry and lived experience. Even Longenbach, persuasive advocate for the social and political element in Stevens' poetry, acknowledges Stevens' growing disinterest in such concerns after *Transport to Summer*. More specifically, Longenbach finds "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" lacking the "historical weight" he finds in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," even though it does offer an "exquisite experience of poetry" (290–91). Similarly, Frank Lentricchia considers such a long poem an "epic of bourgeois interiority," "this poetry of the desire for poetry" (162).

The framework of increasing detachment, which posits a growing disinterest in the realities of the external world in Stevens' later work, at least prior to the poems of *The Rock*, situates "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" at the height of this movement toward "exquisite" metapoetical abstraction. For example, Thomas A. Fink finds the poem reveling in the "seemingly infinite possibilities of playful, stimulating, and fascinating 'troping' or turning of potential significations" (88). These elements of "affirmative play" (88) are certainly present within the poem, supporting the view of Stevens' late voice as one committed to metapoetical abstractions and linguistic playfulness. I would argue, however, that "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" also reveals a significant reappearance of explicit considerations of the external world—specifically, considerations of the notion of place as represented by New Haven. Further, this concern with place as physical reality provides Stevens with the opportunity to reconsider his commitments to abstracted and metaphorical language in his later work and to consider the possibilities of a more direct, realistic poetic mode.

Within "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," "place" operates as a subset of the larger category of *reality*, or as a more specific element of all that is considered external to the thinking and perceiving subject—"reality" as the "Emersonian" "not-self" or "Not-Me," as Harold Bloom identifies it (307). But unlike other subcategories of reality such as "nature" or "landscape," "place" has a specificity, an unalterable quality resistant to the poet's attempts at transformation. A specific place such as New Haven possesses certain essential qualities, or a certain coherence as reality, prior to its inscription within the poem. Put simply, one can locate New Haven, identify characteristics that allow it to be known collectively, prior to and after its inclusion within the poem, and the poet remains unable to alter these facts. Thus we can distinguish New Haven, or other locations mentioned in the poem, such as Bergamo or Rome, from a place imaginatively conceived, such as the exotic "land of the lemon trees" (*CP* 486) in canto XXIX, or the "white" "cabin" "on a beach" (*CP* 412) in "The Auroras of Autumn"—locations the existence of which is entirely inscribed within their respective poems.

The appearance of place in Stevens' poetry, of course, is not unique to this poem, and other critics have analyzed the use of place in Stevens' earlier works. John N. Serio, for example, discusses the changing conception of place between Stevens' early poetry and later meditations, looking at "The Comedian as the Letter C" and "Credences of Summer" as representative poems of these two respective periods. Serio finds in the early poetry "an affair with reality at a physical, and, thus, unalterable, level," which contrasts with the late poetry as "an affair with reality at a *meta*-physical level; that is, it expresses the belief that reality is, ultimately, a fiction, and as such, transformable" (26). Serio offers convincing readings of these two poems, thus supporting the notion that Stevens' later, meditative poems move toward a more abstract, subjective voice divorced from

the “physical” “reality” of the external world. I believe “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” is unique, then, for its repeated concerns with the physicality of place, which complicates the accepted distinctions between Stevens’ early and late work and reveals Stevens’ continued fascination with place as a “physical” and “unalterable” reality. In this poem, Stevens uses the occasion of place and its unalterable physicality to investigate the possibilities of a more reductive, metonymic mode for his poetry in juxtaposition with his more typically metaphorical, analogical mode.

## II

Stevens’ prose reveals his fondness for the concept of analogy, which he often uses as a catchall term for any figural language. For example, in “Effects of Analogy,” he goes so far as to claim that “when one speaks of images, one means analogies,” and that “[t]here is always an analogy between nature and the imagination, and possibly poetry is merely the strange rhetoric of that parallel” (NA 111, 118). Such comments indicate the degree to which this idea of analogy permeates Stevens’ thoughts about poetry, nature, and the imagination—essentially the poet’s entire realm of existence, at least for Stevens. When we consider the rhetorical import of this term on conceptions of poetic language, we can see why it was such an appealing term to Stevens. Rhetorical and linguistic analysis consistently associates analogy with metaphorical modes of language, modes based on resemblance and impression rather than more limiting, direct correspondence between the text and its subject. Mutlu Konuk Blasing’s recent rhetorical studies of American poetry, for example, make such distinctions in poetic language in terms of metaphorical and metonymic tropes: metaphor “works with analogies to reveal resemblances[,] . . . claim[ing] cognitive value yet avoid[ing] reductive equivalencies, proposing only ‘adequate’ representations” (4). Metonymy, on the other hand, works by “reducing the intangible to the tangible, the immaterial to material proofs, manifestations, signs” (4); further, in metonymic figures, “the signified, tenor, or subject is prior to and has no natural relationship to the signifier, vehicle, or text that comes after and represents it according to convention” (6).<sup>1</sup> Metaphor, in essence, allows expansiveness and variability, while metonymy encourages limiting and reductive significations often associated with realistic modes of literary language.

Stevens, not surprisingly, consistently resists metonymy’s “reductiveness” and “conventionality” in favor of the more expansive “correspondences and resemblances” of metaphor, which seem to create a spacious arena of imaginative play for Stevens, particularly in his later poetry. Metonymic language suggests mere representation and belatedness, which can engender a sense of creative impotence, whereas metaphor provides the immediacy of its own invention. Yet language as mere representation also contains the allure of direct statement, of direct conveyance of experience—a potential means of approaching Stevens’ ever-sought-after *reality*.

"An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" begins with this notion, described as "The eye's plain version . . . , / The vulgate of experience." Yet Stevens immediately qualifies this image with the self-mocking inclusion of "A few words, an and yet, and yet, and yet—" (CP 465). As most readers of Stevens would know, this kind of qualification, with the forwarding of a position and then an immediate back-step from it, typifies Stevens' meditative voice. It is significant, nonetheless, that the poem begins by suggesting a more direct, more "plain" "version" of "experience," of perceiving the "houses" of New Haven. The anticipated qualification to this notion comes most clearly in the second canto, as the possibility of "the eye's plain version," of perception more direct and less mediated, is replaced by the possibility of perception as imaginative construct and projection, where "these houses are composed of ourselves" (CP 466). Instead of the "difficult objects" of canto I, New Haven as subjective construction becomes "an impalpable town," fleeting and ephemeral, as the once potentially solid houses become "habitations that seem to move / In the movement of the colors of the mind" (CP 466).

These early passages establish the important ideas with which much of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" will struggle. In their most basic terms, the two ideas under consideration are reality and the imagination (hardly a surprise with Stevens). Yet Stevens' ongoing musings and conjectures throughout the poem discourage efforts to simplify what he discovers. More specifically, the poem offers, on one hand, a "plain version" of "experience" dependent upon the objective realm, focusing more on accurate representation than subjective improvisations. The other possibility amounts to a highly subjective, "impalpable" experience that appears to risk solipsism, consisting merely of the moving "colors of the mind." Yet it is worth noting that the first option does not constitute an experience of reality itself, but rather a particular "version" of it. As Stevens' body of work consistently confirms, there can be no unmediated experience, no matter how closely we manage to approach reality. Even the attempt to privilege the objective world contains some degree of mediation. When, in canto IX, Stevens characterizes the root of this struggle as his desire for "The *poem* of pure reality, untouched / By trope or deviation" (CP 471; emphasis added), it becomes clear that language is the medium from which he cannot escape. Thus, even at the beginning of the poem, the choice is not simply between a direct, objective experience and a mediated, subjective one. Instead, it is between varying degrees of interference, or different "versions" of linguistic mediation: a "plain," representational language that in its reductiveness may approach a potentially satisfying degree of equivalence between a text and its subject; or a more playful, subjectively construed language that in its search for analogies and resemblances may also run the risk of dissociation from the true nature of experience.

Even early in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" Stevens plays with the idea of collapsing these distinctions that privilege either the subjective or the objective. For example, at the end of canto II, Stevens reaches a point where "we cannot tell apart / The idea and the bearer-being of the idea" (CP 466). This appears to be a point, in other words, where one can no longer distinguish an "idea," which may have preceded and been separate from the thinking subject, from "the bearer-being," or the thinking subject itself. This conflation may seem to favor the subjective realm, as one could argue that the confusion occurs between the mind and what it generates, effacing the presence of anything objective. But I believe the passage highlights the difficulties in distinguishing two elements of perception such as *thinker* and *idea*, thereby raising the possibility of a comforting ignorance when faced with such confusion. Canto III begins with a similar conflation: "The point of vision and desire are the same" (CP 466). Here the terms used correspond more closely to the poem's original opposition, with "vision" suggesting a more passive act of perception analogous to "the eye's plain version" and "desire" suggesting a more active, aggressive subjective posture.

Yet as often happens in this "endlessly elaborating poem" (CP 486), statements such as these suggest Stevens' arriving at a firm position, which he quickly proceeds to undermine. The possibility of an equitable resolution between the poem's dominant terms passes, as cantos IV and V enact the poet's desire to acquiesce to the enticements of a wholly imaginative existence. This process begins by devaluing an objective, imaginatively bereft attitude toward the world:

The plainness of plain things is savagery,  
As: the last plainness of a man who has fought  
Against illusion and was, in a great grinding  
  
Of growling teeth, and falls at night, snuffed out  
By the obese opiates of sleep. Plain men in plain  
towns  
Are not precise about the appeasement they need.  
(CP 467)

This comical figure who fights against the "illusion" of the imagination proves the futility of such an endeavor, at last subdued by "the obese opiates of sleep" and the dreams of fancy that inevitably follow. In canto V Stevens assumes a position accepting this inevitability, apparently embracing the mediated, imaginatively constructed nature of existence:

Inescapable romance, inescapable choice  
Of dreams, disillusion as the last illusion,  
Reality as a thing seen by the mind,

Not that which is but that which is apprehended,  
A mirror, a lake of reflections in a room. . . . (CP 468)

Here nothing can be perceived directly, and Stevens seems willing to abandon the myth of “disillusion,” of unmediated perception, as itself the ultimate “illusion.” Faced with such an “inescapable” fate, the best recourse seems to be the embracing of “romance” and “dreams” rather than the struggle against them. The imagination should be allowed to create, to construct realities, without concern for an ultimately illusory objective world.

Again, though, in true Stevensian fashion, the poem undermines a position almost as quickly as it asserts one. It is New Haven itself that undermines this assertion of “reality” as an “inescapable choice / Of dreams.” Even a seemingly ordinary, quotidian town brings back Stevens’ interest in the real:

In the presence of such chapels and such schools,  
The impoverished architects appear to be  
Much richer, more fecund, sportive and alive.

The objects tingle and the spectator moves  
With the objects. (CP 469–70)

In this passage Stevens finds an undeniable value in the tangible objects of New Haven, which can bolster the sense of life in their creators, making them “appear” “richer, more fecund, sportive and alive.” The passage even suggests that the liveliness found in the objects of the town can be transferred to the observing subjects, as “the spectator moves / With the objects”—a position that mitigates the willingness in canto V to accept a “divided . . . world” (CP 468). Significantly, this canto conveys no sense that the observer himself causes the liveliness in these “chapels” and “schools” through an act of the imagination. Instead, the perception of a genuine “presence” triggers this return to a realness outside of the mind’s imaginings. In canto VIII, Stevens asserts that this realness in New Haven can have a restorative effect: “We descend to the street and inhale a health of air / To our sepulchral hollows” (CP 470). Hence, we find, with little surprise, that Stevens’ “Love of the real” (CP 470) is not easily dismissed. Instead, as he states later in canto XV, it is natural that “The instinct for heaven had its counterpart: / The instinct for earth, for New Haven” (CP 476).

This “instinct for earth,” for what is putatively more real, achieves its apotheosis in canto IX, as Stevens seeks his “poem of pure reality”:

We keep coming back and coming back  
To the real: to the hotel instead of the hymns  
That fall upon it out of the wind. We seek

The poem of pure reality, untouched  
By trope or deviation, straight to the word,  
Straight to the transfixing object, to the object

At the exactest point at which it is itself,  
Transfixing by being purely what it is,  
A view of New Haven, say, through the certain eye. . . .  
(CP 471)

Again, this passage that begins as an apotheosis of the desire for “the real” in fact reaffirms the inherently mediated nature of perception as well as the fact that this mediating function results from language. Stevens does not seek “pure reality,” but only “The *poem* of pure reality” (emphasis added), something constituted by language. He would like a poem “untouched / By trope or deviation,” at least approximating direct perception, but then he immediately qualifies such a desire, as this poem moves “straight to the word, / Straight to the transfixing object. . . .” Fink argues that these two destinations for “the poem of pure reality,” despite their “juxtaposition,” are “two separate paths which never quite cross” (90).

The syntax of these clauses and the ones that follow, with their smooth cadences and steady repetition of words, supports a coherence and complicity between these ideas rather than “separate paths.” One may easily read the following as possessing a significant degree of continuity: “straight to the word, / Straight to the transfixing object, to the object / At the exactest point at which it is itself, / Transfixing by being purely what it is. . . .” The ideas here move smoothly and steadily, with little to indicate discontinuity. Within such a scheme, the movement from “the word” to “the transfixing object” becomes progressive, which makes this concept a schematic of perception predicated upon linguistic mediation. One begins with a concept or idea (here it is “the real” to which Stevens keeps coming back), but when one tries to quantify this perception, one must begin with the words that will represent the perceived “object.” The experience of reading this “poem” would necessarily be the same: one could perceive “the transfixing object” only after the initial negotiation with the words used to describe it.

Such a framework posits poetic language at its most functional, its most representational. Or, to put it differently, the trope here is metonymic rather than metaphorical. The progression of terms in the above passage, between “the word” and “the transfixing object,” suggests a conventional, fixed relationship that contrasts with the more expansive, resemblance-revealing process of metaphor. Stevens’ terms also suggest the inherent split between “word” and “object,” or the text and its subject, that constitutes metonymy as trope—a split that foregrounds the temporal belatedness of the figure for what it represents. Thus, when Stevens alludes to New Haven, the poem’s impetus toward praise of the real, this separation

persists as perception remains distanced from the thing itself. Only “a view” of the city is possible, even at this moment when desire for the real reaches its zenith.

Taken on its own, Stevens’ desire for “The poem of pure reality” in canto IX does not seem in itself unsatisfactory, despite its inherent linguistic element. Yet in the context of the poem as a whole, this tentative position, like most in the poem, proves unsatisfactory to some degree, which motivates Stevens repeatedly to rehearse alternatives. This central, overarching tension in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” significantly affects any reading of the poem: its structure as “endlessly elaborating” suggests the seduction of repeated troping, of repeatedly saying something again in a different manner, even while more discrete passages and cantos explore the limitations of this position. Many critics similarly, and rightly, point out that the poem does not progress in a teleological fashion to build toward conclusion and resolution. Rather, the poem provides us with repeated acts of qualification throughout, always stepping back elusively when it seems it may be pinned down. Filreis finds this quality to be a “central paradox” in Stevens’ late work, as it is “diachronic to sustain its synchronicity, a general moving forward somehow designed to keep the wheels turning” (*Actual World* 222).

Such repetition in the poem challenges our traditional critical frameworks as readers and interpreters, including my own strategy of moving in a generally sequential manner through the poem thus far. Such an approach works to a degree, as we can locate the initial appearance of ideas and explore their permutations. But proceeding sequentially serves more of an organizational function than a logical one. Bloom and Helen Vendler, for example, two of Stevens’ most astute readers, take different approaches to the poem: Bloom proceeds sequentially through its cantos while Vendler organizes her discussion thematically. Because the poem itself does not move toward a final resolution, either approach has the potential to illuminate the crucial ideas of the poem. One could ostensibly discuss Stevens’ musings on modes of language in a different order without significantly altering one’s interpretive insights.

I include this recognition of interpretive limitations as a preface to my discussion of canto XII, for this canto provides a tentative sense of resolution to Stevens’ musings thus far in the poem, in spite of the poem’s unerring ability to avoid any satisfying sense of closure. In simple terms, the poem began by elucidating the two versions of experience it would play against each other: a more realistic, “plain version” of experience and a more subjective, imaginatively conceived one. The difficulty of finding satisfaction with either of these choices, as both are conceptually rooted in the belatedness of language, becomes most acute for Stevens when faced with the undeniable realness and physicality of New Haven in cantos VII and VIII. Canto IX offers an initial response to this difficulty with its desire for “The poem of pure reality.” In canto XII, however, Stevens responds

to and elaborates upon these musings, for in canto IX the conception of language and its relation to the real was one of unavoidable mediation, which carries with it a sense of displacement and belatedness from the immediacy of experience. In canto XII Stevens posits another version of "The poem of pure reality," this time embodied in the presence of voice:

The poem is the cry of its occasion,  
Part of the res itself and not about it.  
The poet speaks the poem as it is,

Not as it was: part of the reverberation  
Of a windy night as it is, when the marble statues  
Are like newspapers blown by the wind. (CP 473)

Here Stevens seeks a poetic mode that can capture the essence of experience, that can become an integral part of the "occasion" itself rather than merely being "about it." We see this "cry" seeking to bridge the temporal gap inherent in representation, attempting to situate the poem squarely in the present, in the "occasion" "as it is" rather than "as it was." This desire seeks to fulfill the essential lack of presence created by language; it is, in essence, the constitutive desire that language use creates. Thus, identifying this poem as a "cry" conveys an appropriate sense of urgency for what is at stake here. Yet, precisely because the stakes are so high, the ambitions for poetry so great, one senses the need for qualification even outside of this particular poem's tendency to provide it. Stevens does so in the second half of this canto, acknowledging the inevitability of some temporal gap:

The mobile and the immobile flickering  
In the area between is and was are leaves,  
Leaves burnished in autumnal burnished trees

And leaves in whirlings in the gutters, whirlings  
Around and away, resembling the presence of thought,  
Resembling the presences of thoughts, as if,

In the end, in the whole psychology, the self,  
The town, the weather, in a casual litter,  
Together, said words of the world are the life of the  
world. (CP 474)

Not surprisingly, Stevens is forced to acknowledge a space between "is and was," as the possibility of pure presence within language remains an impossibility. What may be most impressive here is the force with which Stevens fights against any sense of resignation when faced with the inevitable limits of language. He takes this temporal gap and fills it with the

powerful image of the "Leaves burnished in autumnal burnished trees," as the canto continues to build toward an apotheosis of this potential for language to correspond immediately with experience, where "said words of the world are the life of the world." Yet Stevens intersperses the continuing expression of this desire with undeniable acknowledgments of its impossibility: these "leaves" cannot come to be "the presence of thought," or "the presences of thoughts"; their function extends only as far as "resembling." Similarly, the final stanza's conflation of the disparate elements of experience into a final unity is mitigated by the simple inclusion of "as if" at the end of the preceding stanza, reinforcing the fact that this final synthesis can only be an approximation. Here Stevens tries his best to ignore the inevitability he cannot escape, placing this crucial "as if" where it may be overlooked, hoping one might read the final stanza on its own. Yet the qualification remains, and, despite the possibilities it denies, it helps to maintain the integrity of Stevens' contemplative process within the poem.

This failure to attain the presence of voice by construing the poem as impassioned "cry," though an expected failure, is a particularly powerful one due to the imaginative force of the canto. It also reveals Stevens' reliance on the imaginative force of metaphor to replace the unattainable unity of expression that this canto seeks. For as the poet encounters the inability of language to signify "the presence of thought," he employs the metaphor of the "burnished" "leaves" as compensation for this deferred presence. In keeping with its structure as metaphor, this image provides a resemblance of that deferred presence, an approximation that generates the crucial "as if" prior to the final stanza's vision of unified experience. As a necessarily mediated linguistic expression, this trope can only provide resemblance rather than unity, which adheres to the poem's (and Stevens' in general) consistent acknowledgment of mediation as the inescapable condition of experience.

### III

What becomes quite clear within this canto is the imaginative potential inherent in the resemblances and approximations of metaphor: its power to avoid "reductive equivalencies" makes possible an image as moving as this canto's "burnished" "leaves." The force of this image contrasts with the reductive, metonymic scheme of canto IX, as Stevens considers an escape from "trope or deviation" with the more limiting move directly from "word" to "object." Although canto XII's metaphor cannot offer such a direct, potentially unerring movement between the text and reality, it allows Stevens to replace this representational lack with the vitality of an imaginative construction.

In keeping with the poem's oscillating structure, subsequent cantos quickly mitigate canto XII's seemingly strong case for metaphor as a preferable mode of linguistic expression, and again the physical reality of New

Haven figures prominently in this qualification of metaphor's desirability. Cantos XIII and XIV introduce the character of "Professor Eucalyptus of New Haven" (CP 475), whom Bloom identifies as "a parody of Stevens" (322) and his ongoing search for "God in the object itself" (CP 475). Through this self-parodic figure Stevens mocks his recurring search for metaphysical meaning in the quotidian, with his "eye that does not look / Beyond the object" (CP 475). Of course, Stevens cannot help but move beyond the immediate object in his poetry and into the realm of abstraction. But in these passages his alter-ego, Professor Eucalyptus, amusingly attempts to train his focus exclusively on the "object" he finds in his room while ignoring the less manageable physical reality that lies just outside his window, in "the ramshackle spout in which / The rain falls with a ramshackle sound" (CP 475). In spite of these distractions, Stevens associates the Professor's focus on the "object" with "The instinct for earth, for New Haven, for his room, / The gay tournamonde as of a single world / In which he is and as and is are one" (CP 476). Here again, the poem suggests the possibility of a direct, objective focus on reality that can convey the immediacy of experience, where its mediated nature becomes indistinguishable from experience itself, or where "as and is are one."

This possibility does not exactly constitute an alternative to the metaphorical mode of experience from canto XII; the self-mocking tone of these passages suggests that Stevens himself finds his constant oscillations between varied modes of experience humorous. Instead, Stevens reveals that, despite his attempts to move deliberately through these dialectical musings, the uncontrollability of the mundane world around him manages to intrude upon this process. Here this possible conception of a "single world" where "as and is are one" cannot overcome the distraction of the rain and the waterspout, as "The rain [that] kept falling loudly" (CP 476) outside of this particular "world" cannot be ignored. In canto XIII, Stevens acknowledges a similar "difficulty" presented by the physical realities that remain external to any subjective constructions, as "visible" reality, such as "The actual landscape," presents a challenge to any imagined, "invisible" worlds. Stevens reveals this dilemma as he acknowledges "The difficulty of the visible / To the nations of the clear invisible" (CP 474).

As the poem moves through its middle cantos after the introduction of Professor Eucalyptus, Stevens continues his seemingly self-defeating process, continually acknowledging the unavoidable mediation of experience while still seeking the means of overcoming it. Significantly, these discussions do not overtly consider language's specific function in determining the nature of experience. Nonetheless, important similarities do persist between the ideas discussed in these middle cantos and those ideas outlined in the poem's earlier sections, such as Stevens' recurring desire to approach and perceive the physical reality around him. From this desire arises Stevens' ongoing concern with the sense of separation resulting from the inherent belatedness of representation, that unavoidable temporal gap

between “the poem as it is” and the poem’s subject “as it was.” Again, this dilemma of belatedness is more closely associated with a realistic, metonymic trope, which constructs the relationship between signifier and signified in a conventional manner (moving in a fixed, “straight” pattern between “object” and “word”), and which contrasts with a metaphoric trope, which partially assuages this sense of belatedness with the novelty of its own invention.

In canto XVIII Stevens explores his fears of irrelevance, of falling into mere imitation and repetition, that are generated by the possibility of belatedness in artistic expression:

It is the window that makes it difficult  
To say good-by to the past and to live and to be  
In the present state of things as, say, to paint

In the present state of painting and not the state  
Of thirty years ago. It is looking out  
Of the window and walking in the street and seeing,

As if the eyes were the present or part of it,  
As if the ears heard any shocking sound,  
As if life and death were ever physical. (CP 478)

This passage conveys a dual sense of belatedness, one that arises in both life and art—in the difficulty of living “In the present” as well as in the difficulty of painting, or more generally producing art, in a “present” mode. Of course, much of Stevens’ poetry moves toward the conflation of these two realms and revealing their division as an artificial one; later in this poem, Stevens specifically acknowledges his desire for “proof that the theory / Of poetry is the theory of life” (CP 486). What is unusual in this passage, however, is that the immediate reality found outside of the window, found in “walking in the street and seeing,” does not assist in the desire “to live and to be / In the present,” but instead “makes it difficult.”

Previously, Stevens had sought to encounter “the object / At the exactest point at which it is itself,” but here that possibility becomes strained again. In this instance, however, the artificial conventions of language are not to blame. Instead, the passage calls into question the putatively natural acts of seeing and hearing, which it seems Stevens had assumed could allow a direct experience of reality. Such an attempt to encounter the immediacy of reality falters from the assumption that “the eyes were the present or part of it”—that visual perception, in other words, could be inseparable from the reality of that which it perceives. The act of hearing proves to be similarly lacking, as Stevens rejects the assumption that “the ears heard any shocking sound.” In this situation, then, the perceiving subject finds itself divorced from the physical world entirely, as even the simplest means

of perception indicate a gap between the mind and the physical world. The subject's perceptions of this physical world will always feel belated and distanced, and the distinctions between a physical "past" and a perceiving "present" persist.

This acute sense of separation from the physical world implies experience at its most isolated, its most solipsistic. Previously in the poem, the subjective act of metaphor had raised the possibility of one's becoming distanced from the immediacy of reality, because metaphor relies on the imagination to construct resemblances between the perceiving subject and its experience of that reality. Now this division seems to be precipitated not only by language use and its inherent gap between signifier and signified, but also by the most basic acts of perception. Consciousness itself, in other words, becomes an experience of isolation in these passages.

Canto XIX continues to consider this notion, as its first lines posit physical reality as an experience of the mind: "The moon rose in the mind and each thing there / Picked up its radial aspect in the night, / Prostrate below the singleness of its will" (CP 478). Under these circumstances, Stevens considers whether a scheme of such isolated subjectivity might be empowering, with the single mind constructing its own, sufficient reality. Such a scheme may even provide a unity of experience, obviating the previously described experience of a present that only approximates a belated past. Here Stevens envisions such a coherence:

A century in which everything was part  
Of that century and of its aspect, a personage,  
A man who was the axis of his time,

An image that begot its infantines,  
Imaginary poles whose intelligence  
Streamed over chaos their civilities. (CP 479)

Unfortunately, as Stevens wonders what the key to such an age may be and what may allow one to be "the axis of his time," a clear answer cannot be discovered. Instead, "A figure like Ecclesiast, / Rugged and luminous, chants in the dark / A text that is an answer, although obscure" (CP 479). As in the previous canto, perception remains limited, "dark" and "obscure," as Stevens cannot perceive the "answer" that this "figure" conveys. This passage suggests a sense of isolation for both Stevens and this chanting figure, as the possibility for communication and communion between them goes unrealized. Even with Stevens' seeking answers and this figure's chanting them, both appear mastered by the darkness and obscurity in which they find themselves. An understanding of how to overcome the "chaos" with "civilities" remains elusive.

These considerations of the efficacy and limits of perception, although not as specifically concerned with the function of language as elsewhere

in the poem, reveal similar shortcomings in the nature of experience and the ways in which its inherently mediated structure might be negotiated. Canto XVIII posits the unsettling notion that the real to which Stevens repeatedly wishes to return may in fact lack any physical realness that can be directly experienced by human perception. Thus, Stevens' desire for reduction, for approaching the putative realness of what can be immediately perceived, remains constantly deferred, and actual experience remains belated from any physical presence, just as the progression from "word" to "object" in canto IX left the poet unable to experience reality as "purely what it is."

Faced with this notion of isolated subjectivity, Stevens considers the mind's potential to construct a unified world of its own that would impose its sense of order onto the external world, creating "A century in which everything was part / Of that century and of its aspect." Stevens considered a similar scheme in canto XII that relied more explicitly on the power to create through language, where the "words of the world" could become "the life of the world." But this conception of language transforming reality achieved only partial success, as what the imagination conceived could only *resemble* the "presences of thoughts." Similarly, the potential for the mind to create and impose order in canto XIX goes unrealized for Stevens, as the means for achieving this goal remains obscure. Instead, one detects a mounting sense of isolation and impotence as these recurring speculations continually affirm the elusiveness of immediate experience.

Not surprisingly, though, Stevens' concerns about experience as an intensely subjective process wane as his desire for getting closer to the real resurfaces, despite any previous intimations of the impossibility of such an occurrence. In canto XXII, the character of Professor Eucalyptus reappears to remind us: "The search / For reality is as momentous as / The search for god.'" Stevens then compares this momentous thrust with "the philosopher's search / For an interior made exterior / And the poet's search for the same exterior made / Interior" (CP 481). Because Stevens so consistently straddles the fence between these two roles, seeking to be both poet and philosopher, the specific differences between the movements from "interior" to "exterior" or "exterior" to "interior" matter less than the more general desire to conflate the two terms and bring the perceiving subject and the objective world into closer contact. Later in the poem, in keeping with his desire for immediate, concrete experience, Stevens returns to the notion of isolated subjectivity, the notion "that reality exists / In the mind," only to dismiss it again:

If it should be true that reality exists  
In the mind: the tin plate, the loaf of bread on it,  
The long-bladed knife, the little to drink and her

Misericordia, it follows that  
Real and unreal are two in one: New Haven  
Before and after one arrives. . . . (CP 485)

The irony of the passage's first phrase, "If it should be true," signaled by its affected, contrived tone, suggests that what follows is, in fact, not true. For example, the notion that "Real and unreal" could be synonymous seems incompatible with Stevens' constant returning to the notion of some kind of tangible, perceivable real. The parallel suggestion, that "New Haven / Before and after one arrives" could also be identical, becomes similarly discounted by the poem's insistent desire for a physical reality. For New Haven before one arrives can only be imagined—once one is there, its physical, tangible existence can be experienced, just as Stevens has done at different instances throughout the poem. This idea that an imagined New Haven could be equated with New Haven itself is further undermined by the scholar's "note" that Stevens transcribes in the previous canto: "'The Ruler of Reality, / If more unreal than New Haven, is not / A real ruler, but rules what is unreal'" (CP 485). Here again, as it has throughout the poem, New Haven serves as the poem's touchstone for a physical, tangible reality, and those who fail to account for its presence are left impotently to rule only "what is unreal." Given this reaffirmation of New Haven's tangible significance, the notion that its reality may be identical "Before and after one arrives" proves untenable, as does the larger possibility of a "reality [that] exists / In the mind."

#### IV

As the poem draws to a close, Stevens turns his attention back to a more explicit examination of language's role in the structure of experience, reiterating some of the ideas he considered in the poem's first twelve cantos. Canto XXIX, which originally served as the final canto in Stevens' earlier, shorter version of this poem, presents the "brilliant . . . fable" (Bloom 332) of "the land of the lemon trees" and "the land of the elm trees" (CP 486), as the experience of the former, an imaginative, exotic locale, alters the perception of the latter, the quotidian landscape of New Haven. (Bloom tells us that elms would have been part of the Connecticut landscape when Stevens was writing the poem [333].) When our representative observers, "the mariners," return to their homes in "the land of the elm trees," they find it "'folded over, turned round'" (CP 487). The canto then makes clear that the altering power of language allows this change: "It was the same, / Except for the adjectives, an alteration / Of words that was a change of nature. . . . / Their dark-colored words had redescribed the citrons" (CP 487). Here Stevens appears to be reaffirming the power of the creative subject to transform through language, to fashion a new sense of reality analogous to the original. If this canto had remained as the poem's final statement, it would have served as an uncharacteristically firm note of

resolution (or “Too hopeful . . . a candor” [334], as Bloom describes it) in favor of the transforming power of metaphor, and such a firm stance would have been essentially incompatible with the poem’s ruminative, “endlessly elaborating” pattern.

The two cantos eventually included after canto XXIX save the poem from such a definitive end—one that would have mitigated the nuance and complexity of the ideas considered up to that point. Canto XXX reaffirms the limited nature of imaginative, metaphorical transformation, for its first line tells us, “The last leaf that is going to fall has fallen” (CP 487). In light of canto XII’s apotheosis of metaphor, where the “burnished” “leaves” symbolized the power of metaphorical transformation, the now-falling leaves indicate the limits of such imaginative force, as “something imagined . . . has been washed away” (CP 488). Thus, the poem must again account for the “barrenness” (CP 487) of an externality that can resist transformation, which forces the poem into a qualified position regarding metaphor that is more in keeping with the poem as a whole, as the addition of these final cantos affirms the poem’s move against the predominantly imaginative, metaphorical voice of Stevens’ other late meditative poems. Within “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” employing the “seemingly infinite possibilities” of “affirmative play” remains for Stevens only one of several possible responses to the challenges of experience, all of which are examined, compared, and rehearsed as the tentative steps and missteps in “The swarming activities of the formulae / Of statement” (CP 488).

Stevens’ interest in reducing the accumulated layers of imaginative abstraction in his poetic voice does not end with “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven.” Instead, we see this inclination fleshed out more fully in the shorter, sparser lyrics of *The Rock*, where Stevens continues to seek a “return / To a plain sense of things” (CP 502), confronting the potentially unsettling revelations that this return may uncover. Some of Stevens’ most stark and troubling moments in *The Rock* have their antecedents in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”: for example, the first line of “The Rock”—“It is an illusion that we were ever alive” (CP 525)—echoes Stevens’ despondency in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” at mistakenly assuming that “life and death were ever physical.” Significantly, this same tone closes “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” as Stevens is unable to reach any satisfying conclusion about the reality he seeks: “It is not in the premise that reality / Is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses / A dust, a force that traverses a shade” (CP 489). Yet, as one might expect, Stevens is able to create poetry of great force and beauty in *The Rock*, even amid such stark reductions, for as Stevens concludes in “The Plain Sense of Things,” even “the absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined” (CP 503).

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## Notes

I would like to thank Sebastian Knowles and Steve Yao for their invaluable assistance with this essay. I would also like to thank Bob Torry for his early guidance through the many challenges of reading Stevens' poetry.

<sup>1</sup>Blasing's work posits a typological approach to the American poetic tradition based upon the "master tropes" of poetry: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. These rhetorical classifications originate in classical sources, but Blasing aligns her work with the more recent uses of these terms by Kenneth Burke and Hayden White. She also acknowledges her work's similarities to, and essential differences from, the critical-linguistic writings of Harold Bloom and Paul de Man (see the Introduction to *American Poetry: The Rhetoric of Its Forms*).

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# Place and Nothingness in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens

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## I

FOR WALLACE STEVENS, the details and specificity of the physical world often are most effectively described against a background of nothingness. Stevens articulates this dialectic in such typical proclamations throughout his poetry as: "In things seen and unseen, created from nothingness," or "The way the earliest single light in the evening sky, in spring, / Creates a fresh universe out of nothingness by adding itself." So, too, Stevens calls the poet of description "the giant of nothingness" (*CP* 486, 517, 443).

The concept of nothingness is present at the opening of the Book of Genesis—"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep" (Gen. 1:1–2)—and this concept of nothingness is equally important as an aspect of contemporary Big Bang theory in which the universe is represented by Heinz Pagels as "a reexpression of sheer nothingness" (283). Edward Tryon speculated in 1973, reasoning that since the total energy of the universe can be calculated as zero (because there is a balance of positive and negative energy), " 'our Universe could have appeared from nowhere without violating any conservation laws' " (Bartusiak 257). In a more anecdotal mood, Tryon stated: " 'Our universe is simply one of those things which happen from time to time' " (Bartusiak 256). In the same spirit of cosmic playfulness, the mathematician Alan Guth remarked " 'the universe is the ultimate free lunch' " (Bartusiak 246). Nothingness is regarded as a focus of contingency as expressed by Dennis Overbye in a recent essay in *The New York Times*: "Without the uncertainty principle to forbid nothingness, there might not even be a universe" (Overbye F4).

We know that at the quantum level, where nature functions according to probabilities, not by Newtonian mechanical causal laws, "within one billionth of a trillionth of a second, an electron and its antimatter mate, the positron, can emerge out of nothingness without warning, come back together again, and then vanish" (Bartusiak 259). Nothingness is a necessary idea, in which Stevens firmly believed, against which the idea of

existence needs to be understood and defined. Although the opposite of creation may be thought of as destruction, as in the relationship between order and entropy, it is equally meaningful to conceive of nothingness as the dialectical antithesis of creation in that it can be the womb of creation, the realization of the possible. As Stevens says of the imagination, it "Searches a possible for its possibleness" (CP 481). Both the biblical account of God's creation of the world out of a void (or chaos as matter undifferentiated) and the Big Bang theory of the universe's origin can serve as suggestive models for artistic creation as well. W. B. Yeats, intuitively, imagines God precisely in these terms when he addresses Him: "Though You can fashion everything / From nothing every day. . . ." (209).

Attempting to hold the idea of creation and the idea of nothingness simultaneously in his mind, trying to unite the concept of presence and the concept of vanishing, Stevens' solitary speaker in "The Auroras of Autumn," beholding the spectacle of the northern lights, declares: "This is nothing until in a single man contained, / Nothing until this named thing nameless is / And is destroyed" (CP 416). Poetic creation, naming the world, and the poet's mental annihilation of the named world, which renders it nameless again, are for Stevens twin aspects of a single power. This imaginative power sees forms, possessed in their naming, collapsing back into loss, and sees loss generating new forms in an ongoing process of creative naming and unnamings in which absence becomes presence and presence becomes absence. Language can situate us in place, making place feel like home, and therefore Stevens says "the theory of description matters most. / It is the theory of the word for those / For whom the word is the making of the world" (CP 345).

If "nothing" is regarded, paradoxically, as the presence of absence, this concept can serve to objectify feelings associated with the experience of loss, which then can be embodied in the metaphorical structure of a poem. In Stevens' poem "The Snow Man," the image of the snowman represents the failure of the human mind when it responds to its place in the physical landscape without projecting anything of itself onto the landscape. The imaginative poet must hear "misery in the sound of the wind," as if the wind were not only a physical fact but also a symbolic entity that implied a corresponding human emotion such as "misery."

One must have a mind of winter  
To regard the frost and the boughs  
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time  
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,  
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think  
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,  
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land  
Full of the same wind  
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,  
And, nothing himself, beholds  
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.  
(CP 9–10)

Although this appears to be a poem about the imagination at its minimal level of activity, the poem in fact depicts a new beginning and is thus appropriately set in the month of January. As Stevens says in “*Esthétique du Mal*,” describing the cycle of the seasons as an analog to the cycle of the imagination as it moves from negation to affirmation, from cold perception to warm apperception: “The mortal no / Has its emptiness” (CP 320). The “no” of this poem is the momentary failure of the mind to relate to the landscape, to personify it, and thus to turn the landscape into a metaphor for human feeling, a landscape in which human presence makes itself manifest as an act of beholding, a “yes, spoken because under every no / Lay a passion for yes that had never been broken” (CP 320). The emptiness of the landscape as “bare place,” reflected in “The Snow Man” as a rhetorical pattern of sameness, is transformed into its paradoxical opposite: the barrenness of the scene has its own kind of fullness, “Full of the same wind,” and is therefore capable of bringing forth new acts of mind in response to the challenged and energized imagination.

In arguing for the inseparability of physical fact and of human perception affecting that fact, Stevens is following Heisenberg’s principle of indeterminacy, which claims that at the quantum level any light that we use to illuminate a particle affects the movement of that particle, so that the very act of observation changes the observed object. This powerful idea applies also to the imagining of nothingness, which, in Stevens’ poem, represents the diminished reality of a physical world in which there is no human consciousness to contemplate it. By imagining absence, we project ourselves into that absence and thus create a new entity in the physical world. Hence, nothingness possesses a potential fertility out of which a poem, or even a universe, may be born. Stevens ends his poem by imagining a snowman who is “nothing himself” without Stevens’ imagining of him, thus making a distinction between well imagined and poorly imagined nothingness: “Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.” The nothing that is there is, indeed, the womb of possibility out of which the

poem emerges, and, for the human mind to begin to fathom itself, the mind must contemplate its own inner nothingness.

Stevens succinctly formulates this idea of the importance of imagining the absence of imagination in "The Plain Sense of Things" where reality, represented by a late autumn landscape, is stripped down to its perceived minimum:

After the leaves have fallen, we return  
To a plain sense of things. It is as if  
We had come to an end of the imagination,  
Inanimate in an inert savoir.

It is difficult even to choose the adjective  
For this blank cold, this sadness without cause.  
The great structure has become a minor house.  
No turban walks across the lessened floors.

The greenhouse never so badly needed paint.  
The chimney is fifty years old and slants to one side.  
A fantastic effort has failed, a repetition  
In a repetitiousness of men and flies.

Yet the absence of the imagination had  
Itself to be imagined. The great pond,  
The plain sense of it, without reflections, leaves,  
Mud, water like dirty glass, expressing silence

Of a sort, silence of a rat come out to see,  
The great pond and its waste of the lilies, all this  
Had to be imagined as an inevitable knowledge,  
Required, as a necessity requires. (*CP* 502–03)

After the mind has negated its own metaphorical structures of thought, it confronts a void both in itself and in nature, so Stevens begins his poem: "After the leaves have fallen, we return / To a plain sense of things." The falling of the leaves, like thought negating itself, has left the landscape and his mind virtually empty, and the poem's speaker must regard this emptiness to see what he can make of it. Although he seems to have "come to an end of the imagination," this very proposition has the effect of a beginning, a renewal, a "yes" emerging from a "no." The speaker cannot regard the plain sense of things plainly; rather, he makes an imaginative hypothesis from the crucial phrase "as if"—a cipher phrase for the imagination that appears throughout Stevens' poetry. The speaker feels "Inanimate in an inert savoir," since he has not yet found a use for the knowledge

of things fallen, and yet his imagination has indeed begun to define this diminished and fallen condition.

He says, "It is difficult even to choose the adjective / For this blank cold," but the phrase itself belies its statement: he has, in fact, chosen the adjective, "blank." The choice, in a time of diminished energy, which has been described as "difficult," is seen by the reader as having been made, although the still-inert speaker has not yet added his own cause—his need for a new structure in his mind—to nature's cyclical pattern of change. Not only has autumn come to an end, but also the imagination's fictive creations have become, so to speak, "a minor house," in which the speaker's imagination now dwells. This is now a house without the exotic flourishing of images or thought: "No turban walks across the lessened floors." Yet Stevens is fully aware of the paradox of imagining absence as the image of a man wearing a turban is conjured up even in the verbal act of claiming that he is not there. The speaker must continue, however, to examine his own desolate mind even as his mind is preparing to gather up new energy to reassert an essential Stevensian belief: "It is not only that the imagination adheres to reality, but, also, that reality adheres to the imagination and that the interdependence is essential" (NA 33).

The "greenhouse" is an effective image to convey the unity of natural growth with human design; it, too, is a structure that requires human care. The greenhouse's need for paint corresponds to the human need to create metaphorical structures, a need that is rooted in human nature. In the image of the slanting chimney, we see a structure both enduring and needing to be repaired. The past summer's blossoming and the past structures of the imagination have failed simply because nature allows nothing to last. Change is a Stevensian absolute—"permanence composed of impermanence" (CP 472). What was once a "fantastic" effort, in the sense that it was a great effort, is now seen as "fantastic" in the sense of its being a fantasy—no longer can it be given credence. The cycle of flourishing and collapse is seen pejoratively as a mere "repetitiousness of men and flies," as if men have no higher status in nature than do flies. The speaker has not yet fully been able to make his "savoir" (his knowledge) animate with metaphorical meaning; he has not yet been able to transform repetition into a musical-poetic structure that will express his own humanity and thus enhance and relieve nature's indifference. At this point in the poem, the speaker cannot "think of resemblances and of the repetitions of resemblances as a source of the ideal" (NA 81), as Stevens claims the poet must be able to do.

The word "Yet" marks a sudden release of energy and a leap of the imagination that had been prepared for earlier by the speaker's tentative "as if." The speaker now realizes that his imagination, seemingly inert, has begun its own recovery by confronting its own failure and its own blankness. So, too, Wordsworth's daffodils become animate and dance after he is able to confront his own mind as "vacant" in his surprising lines:

"For oft, when on my couch I lie / In vacant or in pensive mood" (191). Stevens learned much from Wordsworth about the mind's awareness of its own vacancy or blankness as we see again in the boat-stealing scene in *The Prelude* where the boy becomes cognizant of the depths of his own mind: "oe'r my thoughts / There hung a darkness, call it solitude / Or blank desertion" (201). The experience of inanimateness and nothingness, for Stevens, as for Wordsworth, is both a necessary and a real experience. One must measure what one is against a backdrop of absence or nothingness, and so Stevens' speaker can propose succinctly "the absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined." Affirming this paradoxical necessity, the speaker is then able to look at "The great pond," an emblem of unadorned reality, and see it both as "great" and "plain" at the same time. It is great in that, like a mirror, it can reflect as many things as are placed before it, yet the speaker must also imagine its plainness, apart from and devoid of human thought, "without reflections," as Stevens' pun will have it. Yet paradoxically the speaker's mind has added itself to the plainness of the scene by imagining the scene as existing independently from his own mind. In this sense, the scene does not merely embody silence, but, rather, through the mediation of the poet-observer, the scene is capable of "expressing silence." Expressed silence, of course, is the very antithesis of silence itself. The poet has created a fictive voice so that the silence may speak and articulate the human need for connection with the physical world, the place that he inhabits.

Seeing in this poem, as elsewhere in Stevens' poems that are centered in a sense of place, begins as plain, ignorant, animal seeing, "of a rat come out to see," yet there is a potent energy in this image of animal curiosity and instinct. The wish to confront literal reality is the basis of the need for humanized seeing that results from having looked directly and simply, as if with the eyes of animal consciousness that precedes self-awareness. Through the eyes of a rat, the great pond—the pond of reality as place—first is seen as containing only "its waste of the lilies," the lilies not yet appreciated for their symbolic meaning or their aesthetic beauty. What the poet-speaker also sees, however, is the necessity of viewing this waste and transforming it into a structure of acceptance and appreciation, "a place dependent on ourselves" (CP 401). This is the inner necessity of the human imagination as it confronts the "Mud" of the pond, the medium out of which Adam was created, the world not yet humanized, place not yet made home. The varied repetition of the phrase "Had to be imagined" is then no longer experienced as a bland "repetitiousness of men and flies," but as a musical form that celebrates its own capacity for celebration as an "inevitable knowledge." Necessity ceases to be seen as a restrictive limit and becomes a "vital boundary" (CP 524), a boundary necessary for life to exist, for the knowledge of necessity is not wasted, and the poet-speaker, summoning his muse—the "angel of reality" (CP 496)—may again seek out the possibilities of the actual, located in a physical place. As Stevens'

Professor Eucalyptus puts it: " 'the search / For reality is as momentous as / The search for God' " (CP 481). The possibility of the actual, the physical world, is inherent in what the mind can make of what it sees, so Stevens says:

[T]he mind turns to its own creations and examines them, not alone from the aesthetic point of view, but for what they reveal, for what they validate and invalidate, for the support that they give. (OP 186)

In the face of a physical world that is always vanishing, in which "the great cat / Leaps quickly from the fireside and is gone" (CP 264), Stevens' mind has the power to create its own solace through his musical fictions, so that in his late poem, "The Rock," in which the rock is Stevens' symbol of unadorned reality like the "great pond," he can claim

the poem makes meaning of the rock,  
Of such mixed motion and such imagery  
That its barrenness becomes a thousand things

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

For Stevens the "cure . . . of the ground" constitutes the imagination's triumphant achievement of allowing the earth, where we live our actual lives, to be experienced as the culmination of desire: "We make a dwelling in the evening air, / In which being there together is enough" (CP 524).

## II

The concept of the unification of person and place as a kind of marriage is beautifully expressed in Stevens' lines from "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction": "They married well because the marriage-place / Was what they loved" (CP 401). And then again: "Two things of opposite nature seem to depend / On one another, as a man depends / On a woman, day on night, the imagined / On the real" (CP 392). This central idea of poetry's unifying power, what Wordsworth called "a dark / Inscrutable workmanship that reconciles / Discordant elements" (200), emerged early in Stevens, as in "Life Is Motion."

In Oklahoma,  
Bonnie and Josie,  
Dressed in calico,  
Danced around a stump.  
They cried,

"Ohoyaho,  
Ohoo" . . .  
Celebrating the marriage  
Of flesh and air. (CP 83)

If poetry is indeed "the cry of its occasion" (CP 473), as Stevens proclaimed, the occasion of "Life Is Motion" is place itself, specifically Oklahoma—the name of a state that is almost a cry in itself, practically just a consonantal addition to "Ohoyao, Ohoo," Bonnie and Josie's virtually pre-speech exclamation of bodily joyousness. The names themselves are carefully chosen by Stevens as typical of a frontier scene as is the "calico" they are wearing. The "stump" not only suggests the clearing of the landscape to make way for civilization and thus poetry, but it also sets at the center of Bonnie and Josie's dance of life the reality of death, negation, and nothingness, with exactly eleven words preceding and following the central word, "stump." The motion of life is thus to be seen as inseparable from the stasis of death, just as the "marriage / Of flesh and air" is another version of Stevens' overarching attempt throughout his poetry to unify reality and the imagination. Celebration therefore appears in this poem as a natural function of life, breath, and body, a musical design, an aria, emerging from nothingness as suggested by the letter "O," the poem's most prominent vowel. Just as Bonnie and Josie are the product of their parents' wedding celebration, desire coupled with a marital vow, so, too, is this poem, written, let us say, in the key of "O," a unification of place and the emergent spirit of that place.

Whitman's figure of death as a "*Dark mother always gliding near*" (222) in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" directly anticipates Stevens' "Death is the mother of beauty" (CP 68) in "Sunday Morning," but there is a distinct difference in assumptions behind these two representations. For Whitman the purposes served by death and mortality carry the implications of a divine design in which the individual soul and the universe ultimately are one, while for Stevens whatever sense of purpose or design we possess must be imposed by the human imagination. This essential difference is articulated by Stevens in his description of his own poetic enterprise when he says in "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," "This is the mythology of modern death" (CP 435) as he again evokes the figure of death—a figure he has himself contrived as an "immaculate personage in nothingness" (CP 434) as a mother:

And she that in the syllable between life

And death cries quickly, in a flash of voice,  
Keep you, keep you, I am gone, oh keep you as  
My memory, is the mother of us all. . . . (CP 432)

The need to impose order and meaning upon nature can be seen in Stevens' witty and famous little poem "Anecdote of the Jar":

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

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

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

In this poem the speaker, as prototypical poet, places a jar on a hill in the Tennessee landscape. The effect of this artistic placement of the jar is to make "the slovenly wilderness / Surround that hill." The jar does not partake of the plenitude of the wilderness, since it does not "give of bird or bush," though by organizing them pictorially, according to an aesthetic principle, the "[jar] took dominion everywhere." With its biblical echo, "And God said unto them, Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" (Gen. 1:28), Stevens evokes the dialectic between the fruitfulness of nature and the human need to control and harvest that fruitfulness.

This antithesis is captured in the poem's inner rhyme of "round" (a jar-art word) and "ground" (a nature-fruitfulness word). The jar is associated with the word "made" and the wilderness with the word "give." The jar is "bare," a word that in Stevens' later poetry takes on the concept of "barrenness," which in turn takes on the concept of "possibleness," the nothingness out of which new metaphorical structures may arise. Although art, taking dominion over nature, is needed, yet it is our good fortune that nature and wilderness, in their ability to "give of bird and bush," cannot be exhausted. Place in this poem is both a given and a human improvisation, an act of naming, as in the specific name, Tennessee.

### III

Stevens' late masterpiece "The Auroras of Autumn" is a meditation, in ten cantos, of an elderly man as he watches the night sky and contemplates the minuteness of his own existence against this cosmic backdrop, aware that time has already washed away most of his life. The poem's

sense of place is multiple with the specificity of the man's walking on the beach and the larger, more general sense that the world itself needs to be thought of in terms of place, as in the line "These fields, these hills, these tinted distances" (CP 411). In this poem of flux the only absolute is change itself. Thought, too, is a part of this flux as ideas are transformed into images and images into ideas, and even the sense of self seems to vanish in the very instant of its apprehending. The poem opens as the speaker looks at the stars and, in effect, "sees" an idea—the idea of knowledge—and this idea takes the form of a traditional image, the "serpent," thus suggesting that there is something fatal about knowledge, or, as Keats expressed it: "Where but to think is to be full of sorrow / And leaden-eyed despairs" (206).

The idea of the serpent is first described as "bodiless" as if it were a Platonic absolute, but Stevens undercuts this formulation by asking if even this positing of an absolute is merely another variation of a human theme: "Another image at the end of the cave" (CP 411). Stevens asserts that ideas are part of the structure of reality; knowledge and the knowledge of knowledge are as real as physical nature, so he locates his serpent-idea in the actual landscape of the poem among "the pines above and along and beside the sea" (CP 411).

Like the beast and the serpent in the Book of Job that represent the inseparability of God's creativity and His destructiveness, Stevens' serpent represents the knowledge that nothing remains permanent and unchanged. When Stevens tries again to imagine an absolute, a Platonic serpent beyond change, "In another nest, the master of the maze / Of body and air and forms and images" (CP 411), thought itself breaks down into self-contradiction as he describes the serpent as "Relentlessly in possession of happiness" (CP 411). Relentlessness and possessed happiness, logically, are mutually exclusive; thus, Stevens is forced to acknowledge that there is no mastery of time and flux in which we can believe. The serpent of knowledge is, in truth, the serpent of the inadequacy of knowledge to conceive of a happiness that we can possess and in which we can believe: "This is his poison: that we should disbelieve / Even that" (CP 411).

The "plot" of the poem is made explicit in the second canto when the speaker observes himself as "The man who is walking" along a deserted beach and who stops to look up at the northern lights, saying "Farewell" to the ideas that have brought him comfort and consolation in the past. Indeed, this is a poem of farewells, and in this canto, the first refrain, "Farewell to an idea," refers to the idea of innocence. What Stevens means by innocence is that reality exists apart from our ideas about reality, even though we can know reality only through our ideas; furthermore, reality carries no meaning inherent in it before what we make of it, since there is no God who was the purposeful inventor of this world. In his earlier poem, "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens asserted: "Never suppose an inventing mind as source / Of this idea nor for that mind compose / A

voluminous master folded in his fire" (CP 381); it is to this theme that Stevens now returns. This innocence—which for Stevens had betokened the possibility of human beings' creating meaning and purpose for themselves—is symbolically represented by the traditional color of innocence, white, but this "white" has now taken on an appalling aspect. Stevens continues to depict the literal scene of the deserted beach in which the man walks—it is equally the landscape of his mind—in shaded variations on the theme of whiteness, in order to evoke the man's deep sense of loss:

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

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

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

(CP 412)

Stevens cannot bring back that earlier sense of innocent whiteness, "a white / That was different," for it has been replaced with a white that now symbolizes absence and emptiness: "Here, being visible is being white, / Is being of the solid of white." Ironically, the sense of absence becomes so strong that absence appears palpable and solid, and Stevens' past poetic efforts to find value in the world through his fictive responses to physical reality now seem to amount to nothing, no more than the "accomplishment / Of an extremist in an exercise" (CP 412). Yet even this change, this sense of the loss of innocence, is not final; Stevens tells us that the man walking on the deserted beach "observes how the north is always enlarging the change" (CP 412). Thus, what he confronts is a display of lights that is frightening in its cold indifference to human need and feeling, but that, nevertheless, it is magnificent as an endlessly unfolding spectacle. The particularity of place is always the stage, the theater, in which the drama of the meditating mind of ideas is acted out.

In canto III Stevens tries to find consolation for the loss that seems to epitomize all losses, the comfort associated with recollection of his youthful mother, and he declares that the "purpose of the poem" is to bring back his "mother's face" (CP 413) through a flight of memory. For a moment, he is successful; his mother's presence "fills the room," and past intimacy seems to be restored. In the exquisite line, "She makes that gentler that can gentle be" (CP 413), spoken in the present tense, it is indeed as if his mother were with him at that very instant. But that consoling

illusion immediately collapses, and Stevens must confront the truth that she is no longer with him: "she too is dissolved, she is destroyed" (CP 413). In another heart-rending image, "The necklace is a carving not a kiss" (CP 413), Stevens negates the association of his mother's necklace with the warmth of her body by turning the necklace into a carving, like the letters on a tombstone.

For one more moment, however, the consoling image of the past returns as if it were truly renewed in the present, as if the mind could create its own reality: "They are at ease in a shelter of the mind / And the house is of the mind and they and time, / Together, all together" (CP 413), but the dominant fact of inevitable flux and physical change, represented by "Boreal night," will wipe away the sweet constructs of the mind and, so it seems, defeat the restorative purpose of the poem. The final image of the mother in this canto is of her falling asleep, but sleep has already become death in the section that is a "Farewell" to her. Stevens says that "Upstairs / The windows will be lighted, not the rooms" (CP 413), because, in fact, the lights in the house of his past, where he was warmed by his mother, have all gone out, and now only the lights from the northern sky remain to reflect on the windows. The "cold wind" of unrelenting change that chilled the beach in canto II is now acknowledged as the force that prevails over Stevens' effort to console himself through memories: "The wind will command them with invincible sound" (CP 414).

The force that the wind represents is not only the annihilating transience of Darwinian nature, but also the violence inherent in human nature as seen in its social and political manifestation as the comparison between the wind and the knocking of a "rifle-butt against the door" strongly suggests. The social causes of "unhappiness" remain as an undertone within the poem even as the image of the wind returns to its context as a natural phenomenon: "Bare limbs, bare trees and a wind as sharp as salt" (CP 410). And the final image of the elderly man, who has willed himself to affirm the possibility of happiness, "As if he lived all lives," nevertheless does so "To a haggling of wind and weather" (CP 420–21), in which he seems pitted primarily against natural conditions.

The figure of the father to whom Stevens says "Farewell" in canto IV is modeled on the Old Testament god who "sits / In space, wherever he sits" (CP 414), a god who can be everywhere at once and thus can contain all contradictions. Such a god is the master of both assertion and creation since he can say "no to no and yes to yes," but when he "says yes / To no," he loses control of negation; thus, time and flux become forces beyond his mastery. In saying "yes" to "no," the father-god is saying "farewell" to the idea of mastery, to the very idea of omnipotence and, thus, of divinity. And so Stevens ends the canto with extravagant mockery, invoking a god who is not there, in whom he does not believe: "Master O master seated by the fire / And yet in space and motionless and yet / Of motion" (CP 414). Stevens rejects as nonsense such physical contradictions of being in

two places at once or of being simultaneously moving and still, and thus when he declaims, "Look at this present throne" (CP 415), he shows us the old image of the throne of god, but reveals to us that it is now vacant. In Stevens' essay "Two or Three Ideas," he says:

To see the gods dispelled in mid-air and dissolve like clouds is one of the great human experiences. It is not as if they had gone over the horizon to disappear for a time; nor as if they had been overcome by other gods of greater power and profounder knowledge. It is simply that they came to nothing. . . . [It was left for man] to resolve life and the world in his own terms. (OP 260)

Stevens, however, will not be able to find his own resolution until he confronts the indifferent magnificence and grandeur of physical reality, of existence as spectacle.

In canto V, the parody of a creator father-god continues, growing wilder almost to an extreme of madness, and Stevens now likens him to a Prospero gone berserk: "The father fetches pageants out of air, / Scenes of the theatre" (CP 415). But no order comes of this, and Stevens declares, "We stand in the tumult of a festival. / What festival?" Before he can find any order within this whirlwind of images, he must consider cosmic creation itself as the theater to be contemplated, and that, indeed, is what he sets out to do in the next canto.

Still staring at the display of northern lights, Stevens now regards them as a theatrical spectacle in which the drama is change itself. Even the clouds seem to him as if they were rocks and mountains that had been transformed, and everything, no matter how solid, appears fluid and in motion. The seasons are seen as if they take delight in their own capacity for endless transformation:

It is a theatre floating through the clouds,  
Itself a cloud, although of misted rock  
And mountains running like water, wave on wave,

Through waves of light. It is of cloud transformed  
To cloud transformed again, idly, the way  
A season changes color to no end,

Except the lavishing of itself in change,  
As light changes yellow into gold and gold  
To its opal elements and fire's delight,

Splashed wide-wise because it likes magnificence  
And the solemn pleasures of magnificent space. (CP 416)

There is no human or moral component in the magnificence of nature as depicted here. Nature's only "end" is in the "lavishing of itself in change," and thus its end, paradoxically, is to have no end. Since change is an absolute, all structures of thought, as well as all structures in the physical world, will always be "emerging," and they must always suffer "Collapse[]."

The culmination of this canto comes when Stevens tells us that these twin ideas of order and of chaos must be held simultaneously by the mind; they must appear to the imagination as absolutely inseparable as in the single image of the northern lights. This effulgent image, however, in which order and chaos are one, "is nothing until in a single man contained, / Nothing until this named thing nameless is / And is destroyed" (CP 416). Stevens' point is that we do not see anything in the world accurately through our description of it, our naming of it, until we see the thing in its annihilation as well, which renders it nameless. Likewise, to apprehend itself, the imagination must also apprehend its own destruction, and with this awareness Stevens experiences what we can call cosmic dread, the intensified sense of his finitude within the directionless scheme of ongoing creation and destruction:

He opens the door of his house

On flames. The scholar of one candle sees  
An Arctic effulgence flaring on the frame  
Of everything he is. And he feels afraid. (CP 416-17)

This mixture of terror and beauty is a perfect example of the experience of the sublime, as in Wordsworth's vision of eternity when, crossing the Simplon Pass, the poet beholds "The immeasurable height / Of woods decaying, never to be decayed" (269). Stevens' similar but secularized vision will be the source, in canto VIII, of his ability to recapture his lost sense of innocence.

In canto VII, however, Stevens tries once more to conceive of a divine imagination that can encompass such contradictions as being both grimly judgmental and benevolently merciful, a god who, like the god in The Book of Job, is just and unjust simultaneously:

Is there an imagination that sits enthroned  
As grim as it is benevolent, the just  
And the unjust, which in the midst of summer stops

To imagine winter? (CP 417)

A god for whom all time is omnipresent, for whom summer and winter exist, not in their unfolding but in a stasis of omniscient knowledge, leaves no room for change and spontaneity in the universe, and so Stevens tells

us that such a figure “dare not leap by chance in its own dark” (CP 417). Ironically, this god’s seeming omnipotence is revealed as a lesser power than a chanceful and changeful reality that has no authorship. Such an imagining of a god who cannot encompass chance, such “mournful making,” as Stevens calls it, must be rejected, and a revitalized act of imagination must “move to find / What must unmake it and, at last, what can” (CP 418).

Out of this “unmak[ing],” Stevens begins a new meditation on the theme of innocence in which he asserts that human ideas—including the idea of innocence—have a status in reality that is equal to the concreteness of material objects that exist in the dimensions of time and space: “Existing in the idea of it, alone, / In the sense against calamity, it [innocence] is not / Less real” (CP 418). The very need for such an idea—since it would be calamitous, Stevens believes, to the human spirit to live without it—grounds the idea of innocence in human emotion and thus in reality, in place, like the windy beach of this poem. But the converse is equally true, for when Stevens declares that innocence is “Like a book at evening beautiful but untrue, / Like a book on rising beautiful and true” (CP 418), he is arguing that ideas enter reality as fictions but then truly become part of reality, part of nature. And if this is indeed so, then whatever meanings life may yield are not given by god or inherent in nature, but are imposed by human beings through the creation of their own ideas. This ability to invent reality within the confines of mortality and the natural law of entropy—which in essence is also the law of place—is exactly what Stevens means by the idea of innocence as redefined at this point in the poem.

As Stevens continues to look up at the northern lights, it now follows that he sees them as devoid of any preassigned meanings. The spectacle is not a revelation of god, and it follows that the destructive transformations of nature, therefore, do not represent any judgment of human beings or malice toward people on god’s part:

So, then, these lights are not a spell of light,  
A saying out of a cloud, but innocence.  
An innocence of the earth and no false sign

Or symbol of malice. (CP 418)

The fact that there are no inherent meanings in nature is precisely what makes the earth innocent, and if this is indeed so, the “white of an aging afternoon,” the empty innocence of canto II, can be redeemed by a new act of imaginative consolation. The holiness of the earth does not derive from god’s creation but from the potential of our own ability to create holiness in a world that innocently allows this imposition of a human idea upon physical reality to become manifest. In this spirit, even death can be accepted as a holy aspect of life, just as we accept sleep as the completion of

a day, and we can "Lie down like children in this holiness" (CP 418). Knowing that such consolation is his own improvisation, which exists as an idea against calamity, Stevens can again conjure up the primary consoling image of his mother who, as his muse, "The purpose of the poem," represents the human power to augment reality with human inventions—as in the music the mother plays on the accordion:

As if the innocent mother sang in the dark  
Of the room and on an accordion, half-heard,  
Created the time and place in which we breathed . . .  
(CP 419)

Stevens holds the integrity of his innocence as his most precious human possession, and so the cry of his poem, "in the idiom / Of the work, in the idiom of an innocent earth" (CP 419), rejects our culture's earlier belief in original sinfulness as our human inheritance. The essential mystery is that of human possibility, not the "enigma of the guilty dream" (CP 419), Stevens' phrase describing "original sin." This return to an idea of innocence in which Stevens can believe seems momentarily to resolve the poem, and yet the awareness of change and death, according to Stevens' inescapable logic, will not allow any final resolution. So again the image of the invincible wind of ephemerality reappears as a reminder of inevitable personal disaster:

Shall we be found hanging in the trees next spring?  
Of what disaster is this the imminence:  
Bare limbs, bare trees and a wind as sharp as salt? (CP 419)

Nevertheless, since death is no longer associated with guilt or punishment as the consequence of the fall of humankind, Stevens now is able to accept death's coming with easeful and gentle equanimity: "Almost as part of innocence, almost, / Almost as the tenderest and the truest part" (CP 420).

The word "almost" should not be glossed over in this lyrically affirmative passage, since for Stevens no resolutions are final even though we experience some moments of satisfaction as complete unto themselves. So the final canto begins with Stevens, now projecting himself in the role of a rabbi, as he examines the dialectic of self and world, trying to see where he can locate the source of human happiness. In addition to being a scholar of the Old Testament, the rabbi is significant in that he is a man in social contact with others who will "Read to the congregation" (CP 420). Stevens' image of an elderly man walking alone on a beach no doubt represented his own personal sense of isolation, according to Stevens' concept of projection: "As if in seeing we saw our feeling / In the object seen" (CP 278).

But now, in the role of the rabbi-poet, Stevens can feel that he is in touch with his audience, his congregation. In a late letter, Stevens writes:

[T]he figure of the rabbi has always been an exceedingly attractive one to me because it is the figure of a man devoted in the extreme to scholarship and at the same time to making some use of it for human purposes. (L 786)

Stevens' depiction of himself in canto VI as the isolated "scholar of one candle" has now been replaced by the image of himself as a rabbi, a man among men.

Concomitant with this change from isolation to communal connectedness is a radical change of tone: the poem takes on a comic aspect. With the kind of skewed logic that is typical of Jewish humor, the rabbi rejects the formulation that we are "An unhappy people in an unhappy world" for the pragmatic reason that such an idea is likely to mire us in unhappiness. Stevens as rabbi casts out this idea with casual irony: "Here are too many mirrors for misery" (CP 420). The shift in tone comes with Stevens' assertion that the possibility of human happiness is fully in keeping with his rejection of divinity as a false idea, an untenable consolation. Equally, it maintains both a sense of the magnificence of physical reality and a sense of the holy as a human contrivance that meets a need for consolation in the face of impermanence.

Dismissing the idea that we can be happy if we think of ourselves as living in an "unhappy world," because the conditions of change and mortality are a poisonous form of knowledge, Stevens, the rabbi-poet, declares that in a poetry of despair "There's nothing there to roll / On the expressive tongue, the finding fang" (CP 420). The serpent's poison of disbelief in canto I has now been replaced by the "finding fang" of our human ability to determine freely our own fate—an ability that, paradoxically, lies only in the *attitude* we take toward the necessities of change and death. This freedom-creating ability, as it emerges out of seeming nothingness, out of the womb of possibility, is made incarnate in this very poem that, finally, celebrates itself for being a poem. In this spirit of celebration, as his mind rejoices in itself, Stevens cries out with comic exuberance: "Buffo! A ball, an opera, a bar" (CP 420). Just as we live in a theater of place that possesses cosmic dimensions, so, too, do we live in an operatic theater of ideas of our own creation.

In canto II, Stevens had ridiculed the usefulness of his own poetry by describing himself as "an extremist in an exercise," but now he affirms his own poem, calling it "this extremity, / This contrivance of the spectre of the spheres, / Contriving balance to contrive a whole" (CP 420). The serpent of fatal knowledge that he had imagined as he observed the northern lights at the beginning of the poem, he realizes now, can represent any knowledge that he chooses it to represent. He himself is the contriver of

such knowledge, and the “balance” he determines to create is between seeing change and death as necessities and seeing human creativity as free to make of these necessities, in the name of need, whatever we will. Within the limits of physical reality, there are, nevertheless, infinite human possibilities for creating structures of meaning. The “whole” that Stevens seeks to contrive includes the innocence of physical reality and the human need to create a sense of the holy that is not, however, dependent on an authorizing divinity. Stevens’ phrase “The full of fortune and the full of fate” (*CP* 420) refers both to what we make of our lives, our “fortune,” and to what nature exacts of us, our “fate.” In bringing these two together, Stevens no longer experiences death as an assault, as if he were the victim of nature, but rather as a spur to his own imagination that enables him to empathize with the lives of others: “As if he lived all lives, that he might know” (*CP* 420). This expanded knowledge frees him from the two destructive alternatives of repressing the idea of death, denying it through a fantasy of another life in heaven, or of rebelling against death as if the laws of nature can be overthrown.

In canto VII, Stevens had asked if there were an imagination “which in the midst of summer stops / To imagine winter?” (*CP* 417). In the last stanza of the poem, Stevens tries to meet this challenge to the imagination with a final affirmation of the necessity of speech, since we do not live in a “hushful paradise,” but in an ongoing dialogue with nature, “a haggling of wind and weather” (*CP* 421). The physical conditions of the world constitute the awesome, indifferent, and inescapable reality that our imaginations must contrive to humanize as we attempt to “choir it with the naked wind” (*CP* 415). The final image of the poem completes Stevens’ meditation of the cosmic theater of the sky, “these lights,” and provides him, in the nick of time before the onset of winter and death and nothingness, with a vision, “a blaze of summer straw” (*CP* 421), that he can indeed contain in his own single mind—a vision of a conflagration of the harvested hay, occurring there in place and time, yet vanishing in the same instant. With summer and winter in his mind at once, and with his poem both naming what he sees in the northern sky and unnamng the same images as they change even as his meditation seizes them, Stevens resolves his poem with a deliberate gesture of irresolution. Everything remains open. The meditation will have to begin again in another poem, or in another hopeful poet, forever contending with the wind and weather of the world, who, nevertheless, will find the world itself to be “enough.” The disciplined and triumphant imagination must satisfy desire by willing itself to ask for nothing that is physically impossible.

Stevens’ poem insists on the indifferent grandeur and magnificence of physical reality, the limiting concreteness of place, and the human capacity to “contain” the knowledge of this indifference, to see it as innocence. The poem insists that consolation is the work of the human imagination

and is to be found not inherent in the material world but in the attitude that we take toward physical reality, in the contrivance of our sense of place, "These fields, these hills, these tinted distances." In defining the vital role of the human imagination in its confrontation with nothingness, Emily Dickinson anticipates Wallace Stevens in her pithy lines, "'Nothing' is the force / That renovates the World—" (J 1563). Likewise, there is no one whom the late Stevens more resembles than Prospero as described by Stevens as the father "who fetches pageants out of air," and no one whose theory of the imagination Stevens more embodies than Theseus' in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, who defined the genius of the imagination as the ability to "give[] to airy nothing / A local habitation and a name" (V.i.16-17).

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## Place and Poetry in Stevens' "The Rock"

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### I

LIFE IS AN AFFAIR of people not of places. But for me life is an affair of places and that is the trouble" (*OP* 185). Although Wallace Stevens might have considered life an affair of places at the time he made this much-discussed entry in his "Adagia," such was definitely not his mature position. Stevens did not consider life "an affair of places," not if this must mean that he afforded people a lesser priority in the relationship between place and people the remark posits. The "Adagia" statement is frequently belied by Stevens' poetry itself, especially his late, presumably most mature work. "An Old Man Asleep," the first poem in *The Rock* (the final section of Stevens' *Collected Poems*), is typical:

The two worlds are asleep, are sleeping, now.  
A dumb sense possesses them in a kind of solemnity.

The self and the earth—your thoughts, your feelings,  
Your beliefs and disbeliefs, your whole peculiar plot;

The redness of your reddish chestnut trees,  
The river motion, the drowsy motion of the river R.  
(*CP* 501)

Brief as it is, "An Old Man Asleep" offers a rich account of the relation between earth and self, the poem's equivalents of the "Adagia" pronouncement's place and people. Here, as throughout *The Rock*, self and earth, people and place, are inseparable. Thus when the self sleeps, both sleep. Thus—where we might expect language indicating which elements belong to the self and which to the earth—thoughts, feelings, and beliefs are instead made to merge matter-of-factly with trees and river, with only the common "your" to indicate attribution. Most tellingly, the whole list is made to pivot around the word "plot," whose suggestions of both physical place and human story reinforce the conclusion that the two, though different, are inseparable and equivalent. Such a conclusion is suggested

also by the last line's use of the conspicuously generic "river R," as if citing the river's humanly conferred proper name would skew the equation in the direction of the self.

*The Rock* contains an unusual abundance of poems that feature equivalents of the "self" and "earth" pairing—"person" and "space" (CP 505), "mind" and "Rome" (CP 508), "spirit" and "world" (CP 519), for example—and in each poem the relationship between the entities named by its key terms is similar to that depicted in "An Old Man Asleep." But, inasmuch as "self" and its equivalents in the above list are most often used to denote a single being, is it legitimate to equate these words with the "people" of the "Adagia" statement? And, if not, what becomes of my contention that these poems controvert the solipsism the statement seems to admit? To meet this possible objection we first need to acknowledge that, in their contexts, these focal words—"person," "self," "spirit"—all ultimately refer to the same specific aspect of mind, the poetic powers brought to bear when the mind attends fully to its place.

Stevens articulates his mature position regarding these powers in a speech he delivered in March 1951 on the occasion of receiving the National Book Award for *The Auroras of Autumn*. Speaking less than a year after the publication of "The Rock," he declares that the poet

considers his function to be this: to find, by means of his own thought and feeling, what seems to him to be the poetry of his time . . . and to state it in a manner that effectively discloses it to his readers.

I say that he is to find it by his own thought and feeling; and the reason for this is that the only place for him to find it is in the thought and feeling of other people of which he becomes aware through his own thought and feeling. . . . There is about every poet a vast world of other people from which he derives himself and through himself his poetry. (OP 254)

Stevens' 1948 address "Effects of Analogy" makes much the same claim: the "measure of the poet is the measure of his sense of the world and of the extent to which it involves the sense of other people" (NA 123–24). These passages acknowledge a mutually dependent and intimate relationship: without an awareness of "the vast world of other people," poets have nothing to say. Without their poets, the people's thoughts and feelings remain unarticulated and therefore unknown. Stevens' mature position regarding the interaction between place and people is best understood in the light of this complex prior connection between people and their poets. Focusing primarily on *The Rock's* title poem, I argue that Stevens' late poetry typically describes a relationship between place and people very different from that suggested by his "Adagia" pronouncement—that, in fact, he saw the two as inseparable and equivalent contributors in a

process whose product is nothing less than life itself, as he had come to define it by this late point in his career.<sup>1</sup>

## II

In "The Rock," the role of place is filled by the rock itself. Since what the rock signifies in this poem is so problematical, let me offer a provisional definition, one that this essay must eventually try to justify: the rock signifies the present, in both the spatial and the temporal senses of that word, the "there" in which one finds oneself at a given moment.<sup>2</sup> The equivalent of "people" in "The Rock" is the human mind, more specifically its poetry-making facility, which the poem celebrates as the highest expression of mind. Neither rock nor poetry is mentioned explicitly until the poem is well underway. Much of its first section, entitled "Seventy Years Later," recounts instead the speaker's struggle with the despair expressed in the first line: "It is an illusion that we were ever alive" (*CP* 525). Even his remembrance of what had been a particularly intense scene from his youth is colored at first by his debilitating despair: "The meeting at noon at the edge of the field seems like / An invention" (*CP* 525). As the speaker's reverie proceeds, however, despair gradually yields to a fascination with what he is seeing for the first time about this scene from the past, a fascination that reaches ecstatic proportions. In this vision the lovers' embrace becomes

a queer assertion of humanity:

A theorem proposed between the two—  
Two figures in a nature of the sun,  
In the sun's design of its own happiness,

As if nothingness contained a métier,  
A vital assumption, an impermanence  
In its permanent cold, an illusion so desired

That the green leaves came and covered the high rock,  
That the lilacs came and bloomed, like a blindness  
cleaned,  
Exclaiming bright sight, as it was satisfied,

In a birth of sight. The blooming and the musk  
Were being alive, an incessant being alive,  
A particular of being, that gross universe. (*CP* 525–26)

This new "bright sight" should not be confused with a reliving of the original one. However much such repetitions might be the goal of wistful human nostalgias, Stevens viewed them as neither possible nor desirable. The bright sight is, rather, a new synthesis, a sudden seeing of that first

experience from a more inclusive perspective, one in which the speaker and his lover are not participants as much as they are instances. We should note, too, that this birth of sight is not what causes the speaker's celebration. As he is expressing his joy, after all, the experience itself is already over: "The blooming and the musk / *Were* being alive" (CP 526; my emphasis). What most excites the speaker about his experience is that he can still have it, that "being alive" remains a possibility for him.

In that it reminds us of how rapidly even a heightened experience can slip into the past, however, the passage also qualifies its exuberant conclusion. Like any other human moment, like those recalled as the poem opened, this one is potential fodder for despair. The passage thus sets up the poem's remaining two sections, whose major burden is to identify a mode of experience impervious to change and forgetting:

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

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

The leaves are this poem's figure for various enlivening human responses to the innate barrenness of the rock, understood again as the place in which we find ourselves, that which is present to us. As previously noted, the problem with the covering leaves of section I is that they are only temporary, subject to the vagaries of natural change and human memory. As such they well exemplify what Stevens, in canto VII of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," calls "balances that happen," "balance" being one of the terms he uses to designate the kind of synthesis he calls "bright sight" in section I of "The Rock":

Perhaps there are times of inherent excellence,

As when the cock crows on the left and all  
Is well, incalculable balances, . . .

not balances  
That we achieve but balances that happen,

As a man and woman meet and love forthwith. (CP 386)

"The Rock" goes on, however, to describe a different formulation of the leaves, one capable of curing us of the rock's barrenness rather than merely covering it temporarily. This incarnation of the leaves, which we subsequently learn is poetry, is "beyond forgetfulness"—capable of maintaining the presentness of the present.

Before we can speculate further on what Stevens means by a cure of the rock, we will need to have a better understanding of what the rock means in this poem. For this we turn to section III and its discussion of the relation between the rock and the human mind. As has often been noted, this section, entitled "Forms of the Rock in a Night-Hymn," offers a confusing abundance of definitions for the rock. Harold Bloom, for example, finds the figure of the rock "too large and self-contradictory. . . . There the rock is alpha and omega, final reduction and final reimagining, the way up and the way down, and too much else besides" (344–45). One way of sorting out the plethora of appositives is to see them as illustrations of two different versions or modalities of the rock. The first of these appears as the section opens:

The rock is the gray particular of man's life,  
The stone from which he rises, up—and—ho,  
The step to the bleaker depths of his descents . . .

The rock is the stern particular of the air,  
The mirror of the planets, one by one. . . . (CP 528)

The "gray particular" is what we earlier called "the present"—colorless, discrete materiality, the rock as it exists apart from human interaction. We cannot, as Stevens observes so frequently throughout his poetry, directly experience this version of the rock. As the section proceeds it introduces a second version, that created by the rock's "silent rhapsodist," the human eye—by extension the mind and its poetry. In the mind, via a turning emblematic of all our fictive colorations, the gray rock becomes turquoise. By calling it the rock's "rhapsodist," the etymological root of which is "to stitch together," the poem acknowledges another of the mind's vital contributions, its recognition of the connections—physical laws, motive forces, essential similarities—that obtain among the world's particulars, which in themselves exist simply "one by one." In its traffic with the place in which it finds itself, the mind seldom realizes its full potential, lapsing instead into a variety of inferior, obfuscating colorations: romantic escapisms, deadening clichés (the source of a different sort of grayness). A major portion of Stevens' poetry, of course, attempts to expose such lapses. At its best, however, the mind is capable of a birth of sight regarding the present. As illustrated in Stevens' account of "balances that happen," such moments of intense focus can simply descend upon us; that is, they need not be consciously and deliberately achieved. But the experiences that survive forgetfulness, that effect not just a covering of the rock but a cure, are laboriously distilled from the rigorous questings featured in so much of Stevens' work. "The Rock," as we will see when we return to section II, associates such experiences exclusively with the creating and re-creating—that is, the reading—of poetry.

Brought into its optimal relationship with the mind, the rock—in and of itself a gray particular—becomes instead “the habitation of the whole”:

that which is near, point A  
In a perspective that begins again

At B: the origin of the mango’s rind. (*CP* 528)

The mind is normally obliged to operate within the constraints of what is called its perspective. We cannot focus simultaneously on all that we find before us but must instead concentrate on a single point or place, one that is more or less near. But the mind has the ability to achieve a more powerful mode of vision, one that not only sees the near point upon which the eye has fixed but also connects it with point “B” and all the other points—within and beyond the current field of vision—with which the present point is connected in a vital continuum. When not arbitrarily extrapolated from this whole, each point reveals itself as both beginning and end, origin and rind. In such a perspective, everything is implicitly contiguous, near; and the whole presents itself in each of its particular places. In “A Collect of Philosophy,” Stevens cites with approval Alfred North Whitehead’s very similar concept of “the perceptual field”:

“My theory involves the entire abandonment of the notion that simple location is the primary way in which things are involved in space-time. In a certain sense, everything is everywhere at all times, for every location involves an aspect of itself in every other location. Thus every spatio-temporal standpoint mirrors the world.” (Whitehead qtd. in *OP* 273)

Stevens typically associates the quest to achieve a right relation of mind to place with an anxious striving. In “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” for example, we hear:

It is possible, possible, possible. It must  
Be possible. It must be that in time  
The real will from its crude compoundings come. . . . (*CP* 404)

And in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” the speaker seems to fear that, for all his assiduous effort, he has not been exacting enough:

A more severe,  
  
More harassing master would extemporize  
Subtler, more urgent proof that the theory  
Of poetry is the theory of life. . . . (*CP* 486)

The rare moments when mind achieves balance with its place, however, are described quite differently: "It is the rock where tranquil must adduce / Its tranquil self, the main of things, the mind" (CP 528). "Tranquil," reminiscent of other key terms—especially "peace" and "rest"<sup>3</sup>—that Stevens typically associates with experiences of balance, owes a portion of its etymology to the Old High German *hwila*, meaning "time." *Hwila* is the root also of our word "while." "Main" in this context means not only "principal" but also "force," as in the phrase "might and main." Thus these two lines, unusually dense even for Stevens, contribute a significant refinement to the argument we have been tracing. The human mind, they suggest, requires the particulars of place—the present that is the rock—for its very existence. At the same time, the mind operates as a vital force among these particulars, a force manifested, for example, when its colorations complete or fulfill the gray rock. Place and mind, however, are not simply mutually constitutive, mutually defining. When exhibiting its full powers, the mind aligns itself with place to form a relationship in which—simultaneously similar and different—mind and place, like the terms of a metaphor, create a new mind/place between them. The generic name for the experience of such relationship is "knowledge," more specifically the knowledge-as-love captured in section II's phrase "New senses in the engenderings of sense" (CP 527), where the play on the mental and physical implications of both "engenderings" and "sense" represents yet another expression of the central mind/place relationship in "The Rock." Considered temporally, the experience is a suspension of change and difference, that is, a timelessness within time, an extended "whiling" that is the counterpart of the scene's spatial betweenness. "The Rock" names this temporal whiling with its last two words, "vivid sleep."

Even the poem's syntax suggests the interdependence of mind and rock:

It is the rock where tranquil must adduce  
Its tranquil self, the main of things, the mind,

The starting point of the human and the end,  
That in which space itself is contained, the gate  
To the enclosure. . . . (CP 528)

The congestion of synonyms and the deliberately ambiguous personal pronouns make it difficult to tell when the passage is referring to the rock, when to the mind. The syntax indicates that everything that appears after the mind's self-generation in the presence of the rock refers to the mind. But, since mind and rock are by this point understood to be one, the references apply to the rock as well. The poem makes the same point when it calls the mind a "thing" even as it is demonstrating how the mind is more than or other than a thing. Another similar suggestion occurs when, a few lines after calling the rock "the habitation of the whole," the poem de-

scribes mind as being “That in which space itself is contained.” Mind and rock are two versions of the same whole that yet exhibit a crucial difference, the mind’s ability to contain. From a root meaning not just “to hold” but “to hold together,” “contain” thus recalls the connection-observing and connection-making facility captured and celebrated in the poem’s play on the word “rhapsodist.”

### III

Equipped with these definitions of the rock, the mind, and the relation between them, we are now in a better position to understand the poem’s difficult account of the cure of the rock and the ways it is accomplished. Here again is the passage that introduces these issues:

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

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

J. Hillis Miller has provided one of the best-known attempts to explain what is meant by “cure”:

The cure of the ground would be a caring for the ground, a securing of it, making it solid. . . . At the same time the cure of the ground must be an effacing of it, making it vanish as a medicine cures a man of a disease by taking it away. . . . “Cure” comes from Latin *cura*, care, as in “curate” or “a cure of souls.” The word “scour,” which I used above, has the same root. A cure of the ground would scour it clean. . . . (10)

All of this is true enough as far as it goes, though it is hard to see how either a securing or a scouring, as Miller describes them, would take us beyond forgetfulness. The cure becomes more plausible, however, when we remember that another meaning of “ground” is surrounding area, the background required by the human mind when discerning and understanding a “figure.” (Miller does mention this possible meaning of “ground” as the “background upon which a figure appears” [6], but he does not pursue its implications.) A cure of the ground is a cure of our dependency on the either/or of figure and ground. As it does in section III, the poem affirms here the possibility of transcending our customary, dualistic habits of mind and realizing our participation in the habitation of the whole that is our place. (Or, to put this in terms suggested by Stevens’ use of the pronoun “it” instead of a repetition of “rock” in “We must be cured of it,” we are cured of the habit of seeing our place as an “it” rather than as a life of which we are part.) This is why the passage can equate a

cure of the rock with a cure of ourselves. The rock and ourselves are separate but the same. The poem makes the same suggestion with its frequent, deliberately ambiguous use of the preposition "of." A construction like "cure of the ground," where the object of the preposition can be the agent of the cure as well as its recipient, provides another illustration of the limitations of the figure/ground, either/or distinction.<sup>4</sup>

"The Rock" depicts forgetting not simply as the mind's inability to recall the particulars of past experiences, that is, to "bring them to mind." Forgetting, as "The Rock" demonstrates in its opening section, is the condition that obtains when the mind is insufficiently or inappropriately attentive to the beings among and by which it is placed. The result is an absence of vital connection, of life. Forgetfulness, whether consciously recognized or not, is the usual human condition; and, as Stevens' poetry repeatedly illustrates, it can have many causes: romanticism, solipsism, Platonism (Christian or otherwise), clichéd thinking, negative illusions of whatever type. In "The Rock" it is disillusion, dismissed in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" as "the last illusion" (CP 468), that fuels the speaker's forgetfulness, whatever might have been its original cause. In that it reawakens our sense of the essential unity both between ourselves and our place and among the constituents of our place, the cure of the ground that is the cure of the rock and the self effects not just a renewal but also a rebirth. It rescues us not from spiritual death—"spiritual" being in Stevens' view a redundant or otherwise meaningless qualification ("As if life and death were ever physical" [CP 478])—but from death itself.

To explain how such a cure might be accomplished, the speaker turns to the same leaves that, when merely a covering of the rock, he considered not "enough":

And yet the leaves, if they broke into bud,  
If they broke into bloom, if they bore fruit,

And if we ate the incipient colorings  
Of their fresh culls might be a cure of the ground.  
The fiction of the leaves is the icon

Of the poem. . . . (CP 526)

The suggestion of seasonal change present in the movement from bud to fruit is made explicit a few lines later in "The pearled chaplet of spring, / The magnum wreath of summer, time's autumn snood" (CP 526) and then reprised, with a crucial addition, a few lines after that: "They bud and bloom and bear their fruit without change" (CP 527). Though the natural buds turn to blooms and then fruit, they do so "without change" because they create in the process the enduring pattern we know as the seasons. Even the etymological root of "leaf"—*lupiti*, an Old Slavonic word mean-

ing “to peel or strip off”—helps make the point: the universal, “leaf,” reveals itself in the demise of its particular incarnations, its “leavings.” By equating this “fiction of the leaves” with poetry, “The Rock” indicates that poetry exhibits a similar ability to change without changing and that it is this ability that accounts for poetry’s curative powers.

To understand how poems change without changing, we need to look more closely at what Stevens means by “incipient colorings.” Eating “the incipient colorings / Of their fresh culls,” signifying the act not just of reading poetry but of reading it well—taking it into oneself—clearly alludes to the sacrament of the Eucharist.<sup>5</sup> Consuming the poem, like consuming the eucharistic host, promotes communion and life. Stevens’ use of the pronoun “we” (“if we ate the incipient colorings”) is especially significant. Just as Christian Communion involves not just one individual experiencing a union with divinity but also entails union with fellow communicants, so readers connect not only with a poem’s author but also with their fellow readers, fellow occupants of the place the poem makes.

Stevens’ good reader, it should be noted, eats not the fruit itself or even the colorings of the fruit but rather its *incipient* colorings. “Colorings” here refers to the same activities of attribution and combination that section III associates with the rhapsodizing of the gray rock. To say the colorings are incipient is to say that they are latent in the poet’s words, their latency unfulfilled without the coloration or interpretation afforded them by the poem’s readers. In that it implies a selectivity and prioritizing on the part of each reader, the word “culls” makes something of the same suggestion. The coloring and the culling *are* the eating, that is, the “eureka” experience of making the poem one’s own and oneself.

What might constitute the poem’s incipience is indicated near the end of section II where we hear that, in the plenty of the world,

the poem makes meanings of the rock,  
Of such mixed motion and such imagery  
That its barrenness becomes a thousand things

And so exists no more. (CP 527)

Incipient meanings issue from the poet’s engagement with the rock—understood here as the occasion of the poet’s composings—through the agency of “imagery” and “mixed motion.” “Imagery” is a synecdoche for all of a poem’s constituent components—its buds, blooms, and fruit—while “mixed motion” refers to the dynamic, pattern-creating interplay among these elements.<sup>6</sup> “Mixed motion,” analogous to the shifting particulars that constitute section I’s “gross universe” (from *uni plus vertere*, meaning “to turn”), thus reintroduces the concept of change, with “change” now signifying a connection-creating movement like that which occurs within a chord or a progression of chords. (Stevens elaborates the change/chord

trope throughout his poetry—most noticeably perhaps in canto VI of “The Man with the Blue Guitar.”) The buds, blooms, and fruit that are the “imagery” of the poem ring changes on one another, establishing in their mutually defining traffic the incipient patterns of meaning that elicit the reader’s colorings and occasioning thereby the “eating” of the poem.<sup>7</sup>

Changeless change obtains not only within poems but also between poems and their readers. Incipience is the product of the poet’s genius for inclusion and arrangement: these words in this order. The preference for a given order, as opposed to all other possible orderings that might have obtained within a poem, indicates that poets, acting as their own readers, have some idea of how the parts of their works relate to one another—some idea, that is, of what they mean.<sup>8</sup> Because this principle of connection is implicit rather than discursively propounded, however, because it is embodied in what “The Rock” calls the poem’s “mixed motion,” it remains susceptible to as many new colorings as it has readers. The poem is a new entity/experience each time it is read. The reader/poem relationship is thus not just analogous to but rather an instance of the mind/place relationship we have been exploring. Just as the right relation of mind to place creates life, so rich readings of rich poems renew both readers and poems.

Our discussion of changeless change also helps explain what “The Rock” means by its identification of poem and icon. We generally understand icons to be representations, most commonly of religious subjects, that share some of the properties of what they represent. Thus believers venerate an icon of the Virgin much as they would Mary herself. Stevens defines the term “icon” quite differently. The icon/poem does not share the properties of its subject; it *is* its subject. As he puts it in canto XII of “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”:

The poem is the cry of its occasion,  
Part of the *res* itself and not about it.  
The poet speaks the poem as it is,

Not as it was. . . . (CP 473)

“The Rock” suggests, further, that it is not only poets who speak the poem as it is. The poem continues to speak—to exist as an “is” rather than a “was”—to those who read it well. The poem exists in the engagement between the poet’s words and the reader’s colorings; these always-new colorings are part of the *res*. It is in this sense that the poem achieves iconicity.

Stevens’ insistence on the reader’s role in the creation of the poem should not be construed as an endorsement of literary relativism. Readers are not free to make whatever they will of the poem, for the poet’s inspired decisions regarding inclusion and arrangement direct and limit their color-

tions. That is to say, the reader's experience, like the poet's, is a finding as well as a making. Stevens makes this point most ingeniously late in section II where he describes the understanding enabled by the cycle of the leaves as a "final found" (*CP* 527), simultaneously a finding and a founding. To say that the poem is for every reader both the same and a different entity/experience is, of course, to say that the poem constantly changes. Far from providing evidence of a meaning- and value-denying relativism, however, these are changes that reveal the poem's changeless potential—among different people, in different place/times—for "being alive."

Until this point it has seemed unnecessary to employ terms of valuation like those introduced in recent paragraphs. Although there may be no consensus about what constitutes a good poem, few people, it is safe to assume, would seriously maintain that a weak poem could have the curative powers "The Rock" celebrates. I raise this issue now because Stevens himself does. "The Rock" is quite clear about what constitutes value in the "world": plenitude of being. This is the burden, for example, of the rapturous passage near the end of section II that celebrates the cycle of the leaves, understood here as both natural phenomenon and poetic figure. In yet another expression of unchanging change, the leaves are said to "bear their fruit so that the year is known," and this understanding is likened to a

brown skin,  
The honey in its pulp, the final found,  
The plenty of the year and of the world. (*CP* 527)

Both the world and the speaker who relates to it with such affectionate exuberance are vibrantly alive. His understanding is a knowledge and a love that, as he takes in more and more of the plenty of his place, ripens like a brown-skinned, honey-pulped fruit. We should note here that, for Stevens, "plenty" signifies not just a limitless bounty but a condition characterized by unity as well as abundance. The unifying agent, of course, is mind ("That in which space itself is contained"), whose simultaneously limiting and liberating properties are suggested by such figures as the "brown skin" and the "mango's rind."

If such plenteousness of nature and spirit makes for life (to say "good life" would be a redundancy), a good poem (another redundancy) would seem to be one that, by means of a plenteousness of its own, does justice to the richness that is its occasion. In the terms of "The Rock," the good poem would be one that demonstrates a dense mixing of motions, one whose colorings can generate "an incessant being alive." By the same token, a good reading would be one that does justice to the plenitude of the poem. A reading that responds adequately to the poem's buds but makes nothing vital of its encounter with the poem's blooms, its fruit, or the relations among all these fails to realize an incipient richness.

#### IV

The speaker's delight in the plenty of the world illustrates one final aspect of the curing properties of poetry. Through the act of finding and making that "The Rock" calls an eating of the poem, the poem becomes a part of who we are: "These leaves are the poem, the icon and the man" (CP 527). This identification of ourselves with our poems, which Stevens means quite literally, appears throughout the late poetry, as in, for example, the lovely lyric from *Transport to Summer*, "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm": "The reader became the book; and summer night / Was like the conscious being of the book" (CP 358). Nurtured by such experience, we are better equipped to resist forgetfulness, to remain alive to our place. As proof of its salubrious powers, we hear in "The Rock" of how poetry can "bud" even "the whitest eye"—that is, the mind least disposed to creative coloring—and "the pallidest sprout," nature minimally alive and also white, owing apparently to the lethal proximity of the previously barren rock. Poetry, the passage continues, can also generate

New senses in the engenderings of sense,  
The desire to be at the end of distances,

The body quickened and the mind in root. (CP 527)

Not only does poetry engender sense but also this sense, understood both as a sensual and an intellectual engagement with place, engenders further, similarly multivalent senses. The previously remarked interplay of the physical and the mental in this line, analogous to the portrayal of the relationship between place and mind in "The Rock," is amplified in the subsequent pairing of the "body quickened" and the "mind in root"; and this final figure's play on "en route" also gives us one more embodiment of unchanging change.

This, then, is the legacy of the curing poem: a conscious disposition and an enhanced ability to "be at the end of distances," to find and found that place beyond forgetfulness where everything is near, the habitation of the whole. "The Rock" suggests two names for this state. One is "love," as when the leaves that are the poem "bloom as a man loves, as he lives in love" (CP 527). The second name appears at the end of the list of synonyms for mind with which the poem closes:

day, the things illumined

By day, night and that which night illumines,  
Night and its midnight-minting fragrances,  
Night's hymn of the rock, as in a vivid sleep. (CP 528)

“Vivid sleep,” like changeless change, appears oxymoronic only to a mind as yet uncured, blinded by the ground’s either/or. What Stevens meant by “vivid sleep” is best exemplified, I think, in his great elegy for Henry Church, “The Owl in the Sarcophagus.” Attempting to articulate the qualities that made his friend a paragon, Stevens writes:

A man walked living among the forms of thought  
To see their lustre truly as it is

And in harmonious prodigy to be,  
A while, conceiving his passage as into a time  
That of itself stood still, perennial,

Less time than place, less place than thought of place  
And, if of substance, a likeness of the earth,  
That by resemblance twanged him through and  
through. . . . (CP 432–33)

One whose sight has thus been cleaned, whose relation to the earth is, in fact, much like that of the curing poem’s to the rock, lives in a vivid sleep—asleep, that is, to our usual anthropocentric and therefore obscuring preoccupations. The passage goes on to describe this version of sleep in terms evocative of both the mixed motion of incipience and the cured reader’s plenteous colorings:

There he saw well the foldings in the height  
Of sleep, the whiteness folded into less,  
Like many robings, as moving masses are,

As a moving mountain is, moving through day  
And night, colored from distances, central  
Where luminous agitations come to rest,

In an ever-changing, calmest unity, . . .  
.....

Sleep realized  
Was the whiteness that is the ultimate intellect,  
A diamond jubilation beyond the fire,

That gives its power to the wild-ringed eye.  
Then he breathed deeply the deep atmosphere  
Of sleep, the accomplished, the fulfilling air. (CP 433)

To equate mind—poetry, vivid sleep—with what it “illumines” is to affirm one final time the equivalence and interdependence of people and their place. With this last great work, Stevens has become the “More harassing master” to whom he alluded in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” (CP 486). “The Rock” suggests not just that the theory of poetry is the life of poetry, or even that the theory of poetry is the theory of life. Whether expressed by the poet’s images in mixed motion, the reader’s creative colorings, or the exemplary human being’s finding/founding of “The plenty of the year and of the world,” poetry *is* life.

University of North Carolina at Pembroke

Notes

<sup>1</sup> By contending that Stevens valued people as much as places, I obviously am adding my voice to those that in recent years have undertaken to mitigate his reputation as a solipsist by showing that his work was in fact politically aware and socially involved. Among these Charles Altieri—especially in his chapter on Stevens in *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry*—articulates an approach to Stevens’ late poems that is most like my own (321–58).

<sup>2</sup> If something like this is indeed a viable definition of “the rock,” then we must add it to the list of Heideggerian parallels so frequently celebrated in the critical canon. The similarity is striking: “Self and world,” Heidegger writes, “belong together in the single entity, the Dasein. Self and world are not two beings, like subject and object, or like I and thou, but self and world are the basic determination of the Dasein itself” (*The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* 297).

<sup>3</sup> The prologue to “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” for example, features both of these key terms which, like “tranquil,” suggest completion, repose, the vantage from which one views the whole:

In the uncertain light of single, certain truth,  
Equal in living changingness to the light  
In which I meet you, in which we sit at rest,  
For a moment in the central of our being,  
The vivid transparency that you bring is peace. (CP 380)

In his essay “Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry,” Heidegger speaks similarly of “rest”: “In poetry . . . man is re-united on the foundation of his existence. There he comes to rest; not indeed to the seeming rest of inactivity and emptiness of thought, but to that infinite state of rest in which all powers and relations are active” (*Existence and Being* 286).

<sup>4</sup> Leggett also notes the significance of Stevens’ ambiguous “of,” a central ambiguity that, as he correctly argues, Miller overlooks (110–11).

<sup>5</sup> The transubstantiation of the sacrament’s elements, the bread and wine, is accomplished via the introduction of form, that is, a speaking of ceremonial words (“This is my body; this is my blood”). In “The Rock,” the rock itself—place—is analogous to the sacrament’s elements, the poem—specifically, the poem’s words—to form. The allusion to the Eucharist is enriched by the description of life in “The Rock” as a moving beyond forgetfulness made possible through the agency of poetry—clearly an echo of Christ’s words to his disciples as he consecrates the host at the Last Supper: “This do in remembrance of me” (I Corinthians 11:24). Other readers have noticed the simi-

larity between Stevens' secular communion and the Christian sacrament. Janet McCann, for example, makes some of the points I raise here, but in the service of an argument very different from my own (127–28).

<sup>6</sup> Bloom suggests a similar reading of "mixed motion": " 'Mixed motion' is the true cure 'of the ground and of ourselves,' but what is this motion if it is not the movement, topological and topological, of substitutions, of crossings that generate meaningfulness in poems?" (350).

<sup>7</sup> Of course, there are those who would contend that these changes cancel each other out rather than create meanings. Here, for example, is Miller's comment on the central relationships we have been tracing:

The multiple meanings of the word "cure," like the meanings of all the key words and figures in "The Rock," are incompatible, irreconcilable. They may not be organized into a logical or dialectical structure but remain stubbornly heterogeneous. . . . They may not be folded together in a unified structure, as of leaves, blossom, and fruit from one stem. The origin rather is bifurcated, even trifurcated, a forking root which leads the searcher for the ground of the word into labyrinthine wanderings in the forest of words. (10–11)

My essay, I think, has shown that "The Rock" most definitely does display a "unified structure."

<sup>8</sup> As Heidegger comments in "The Way to Language," "speech is simultaneously hearing. . . . We not only *speak* language, we speak *from out of it*" (*Basic Writings* 410–11).

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## Two Photographs of Wallace Stevens by Charles Henri Ford

ERIK LA PRADE

IN SEPTEMBER 1940, Charles Henri Ford<sup>1</sup> began publishing an art magazine called *View*, subtitled “through the eyes of poets.” Ford created this magazine as a platform for many of the European artists and writers then leaving Europe to escape the coming Second World War. Ford knew many of these surrealist artists—Roberto Matta, Max Ernst, Yves Tanguy, Salvador Dali—from having spent the past seven years living and traveling in Europe. These sophisticated émigrés descended upon New York and began to transform the city’s art community into an artistic laboratory.

By publishing a new kind of magazine in America, Ford attempted to create a parallel to two former European art magazines, *Verve* and *Minotaure*, which had recently stopped publishing. During the magazine’s seven-year history, Ford would publish pictures and articles on surrealist art, and poetry and art by self-taught or primitive Americans that were deemed to be surreal in their thematic elements. The first three issues of *View* were published in a newspaper format and, afterward, Ford dropped the subtitle and used a magazine format.<sup>2</sup> Each cover of the magazine was published in color with a striking work by a particular artist. Some of the covers presented artworks by Georgia O’Keefe, Morris Hirshfield, Isamu Noguchi, Alexander Calder, and Pavel Tchelitchew.

One half of the front page of the first issue of *View* contained an interview with Wallace Stevens titled “Verlaine in Hartford,” with the sub-heading “Has the Mystery Man of Modern Poetry Really Another Self?” A photograph of Stevens in his flower garden taken by Ford appears twice in the article (see Fig. 1). Alongside the interview, Ford published twenty-two of Stevens’ adages under the title “Materia Poetica.” By the time Ford published the interview, Stevens had attained “cult” status as a poet. His private life also had an air of mystery, and when Ford asked, “‘but don’t you see too many people?’” Stevens replied, “‘one must be serious’” (6).

The interview was conducted on a warm Sunday afternoon, and before Ford arrived, Stevens “had been dozing” (1). They went into the garden and sat “under the trees on rustic furniture” (1), and they talked about various poets: Shakespeare, Keats, Verlaine, and Ford’s recently published



Fig. 1. Wallace Stevens in his garden. Photograph by Charles Henri Ford. 1940. Photo reproduced by permission of the Charles Henri Ford Estate.

book of poems, *ABC's*. Stevens also mentioned how “England, in the U.S., undersells the American insurance companies” and “what the neighbors must be thinking at the sight of his being photographed” (6).

Ford began taking photographs around 1930. By the time he took this photograph of Stevens, he was a serious amateur photographer with ten years of experience. I believe this photograph was taken at the end of the interview, for before Ford left, Stevens remarked, “Make me look romantic in those photographs” (6).

The published photograph of Stevens shows him wearing a suit jacket, vest, and tie. We can assume Stevens takes Ford’s visit in a “serious” frame of mind. Yet, Stevens is also smiling, which suggests he is pleased and perhaps flattered by Ford’s interview. I believe Stevens was aware of his

image and wanted to be seen as a poet in a business suit. During the interview, Stevens admits: “ ‘Now that I am getting older I am more jealous of the demands business makes—I should like to devote more—all—of my time to the study and writing of poetry’ ” (6).

The picture presents an interesting contrast between Stevens the private individual and Stevens the poetic personality. As Stevens crouches behind the flower bush, he presents us with the image of an imp in a garden revealing a secret. Both serious and passionate about poetry, and now older and established, he does not need to hide it from anyone any more.

Ford published only one of his photographs of Stevens. The second photograph, published here for the first time, shows a profile of Stevens, also in the garden, his face slightly out of focus (see Fig. 2). Extended overhead and behind him are the branches of fir trees. In the background, we



Fig. 2. Profile of Wallace Stevens in his garden. Photograph by Charles Henri Ford. 1940. Photo reproduced by permission of the Charles Henri Ford Estate.

can see more trees and the chimney of a neighbor's house. Stevens seems to have his right arm raised, extending upward, because the cuff of his sleeve extends forward, from his jaw, with the rest of the sleeve hanging down.

Ford's personal definition of photography was "visual poetry." Yet his style of photographing was to take a snapshot, very much in the style of his hero, Henri Cartier-Bresson.

What I find interesting in both photographic portraits is how Ford "posed" Stevens, attempting to capture some of the mystery surrounding his private life and at the same time to present us with a picture of a poet whose secret, imaginative life is now made public.

New York City

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Ford was born on February 10, 1913, and died on September 27, 2002, at age 93. For the last five years of his life, I served as his literary and photography archivist.

<sup>2</sup>Readers interested in learning more about the history of *View* can read about it in *View: Parade of the Avant-Garde: An Anthology of View Magazine (1940–1947)* (Charles Henri Ford; Catrina Neiman; Paul Nathan. Foreword Paul Bowles. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991.

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## Poems

### Mister Montague

Brutal as grace, and sanctified by hope,  
He struck his face against the morning moon.  
He gave no quarter to its high clarity,  
Its whitish bloom scattering through the trees.  
Even at eight, and the world waking, lashing  
His bare feet in the grass, he refused.  
His terrier bitch leaned against his leg  
In a contentment like night's enterprise.  
The moon was nothing to her, the heady scent  
Of the canyon fox or skunk no longer in mind.  
The day was nothing to him he could remember.  
It was the moon's day, an astonishment.  
He felt he could not do without it now,  
Without its antagonism, its desire for night.

Lee Gerlach  
San Diego, Calif.

### Sea Nymph

One must feel the passion of summer  
To melt with the thrust and the tumult  
Of the sea-waves crested with foam;  
  
And have been burned many times  
To catch the undertow arched with brine,  
The sandbar ribbed in the tropical heat  
  
Of the August sun; and not repent  
Of any pleasure in the surge of the tide,  
In the surge of the deep swells,  
  
Which is the surge of the spray  
Blown by the same wind  
That is blowing on the same bare girl  
  
In the surf, who plunges in the sea,  
And, ocean herself, enfolds  
Oceans that are not there and the ocean that is.

Michael Stillman  
Palo Alto, Calif.

## Theological Doubt of the French Symbolists

So: you've given up on correspondence  
and now talk on the phone instead.  
The other day you finally made sense  
when you said, "a tree's a tree; now  
let's go to bed."

Have you ever seen the sun light  
upon a spray? A single branch, spread  
up and up and then—chosen? How  
might we mince

words no longer? How might we apply  
the opening of our ends? Let's go  
ahead: no matter the stylus, no  
matter the wax: a mark's a mark  
and will be read.

John C. Estes  
Kechi, Kan.

### Te Autem

From here, the hidden liturgy  
tells me: time to fill  
the feeders, time to change  
into something less  
for the sake of, in order to—  
whatever it takes to move  
a solid through this vapor.

As if Blake's Eternal Body  
were anything more  
than the habitation of sense  
or what the digested call dying.

My heavy limbs are charged  
to quell a hunger I created  
for the sake of, in order to—  
the body lives to fight  
infection, resists the urge  
to skip to the end.

John C. Estes  
Kechi, Kan.

### Tortoiseshell and Hat's Brim

The garden shears cutting at the brambled-over path  
The severed luminescent beetle wings falling to the stones  
You cleave the vines trellising the eastern wall  
You tamp the flowers into place  
Raving purples and bluer-greens annotate the window sill  
The yellow ferns were hurled into the compost heap  
This is your rendering  
This is your division-work  
To strew the ground with nettle-leaves  
To cut your tongue with acid dripped from radish halves.

Basil Cleveland  
Annapolis, Md.

### Central Point

He had, as they say, a lazy eye,  
The brightest, only center of the room  
Of, let's say, forty random people  
Holding bright clear drinks, cigars;  
Neckties, dresses, silk and rich and red,  
Some general's nest of medals.  
You found that eye, or it found you,  
Its fellow glaring at one timid guest  
As interlocutor and judge,  
The peccant eye gazing at—what?  
Young widow crossing knees in gauze?  
Vegetables in silver bowls?  
Company and baubles surrounded that orb  
Like planets, made us a garland  
Of satellites as he stared at me and you  
At once. The room became a funerary frieze,  
That eye the scarab on the tomb,  
Defying graverobbers, all intruders.

Paul D. McGlynn  
Ann Arbor, Mich.

## The Hero of Midnight

*The point of vision and desire are the same.  
It is to the hero of midnight that we pray . . .*

—Wallace Stevens

He lives on the cusp of night and morning  
poised to turn endings into new beginnings.  
He hopes for nothing but change,  
which he embraces like a new lover,  
calling it by terms of endearment, newly coined.  
The hero of midnight is a savior of the night,  
a stealth lover, known only by fellow travelers,  
arriving at the end of each day  
with a bouquet of darkness in one hand  
and ring of diamonds and dark sapphires in the other.  
Imagine him, if you will, appearing before you  
filled with the possibilities of never.  
He moves swiftly like a river,  
dances to the unheard melodies of the air.  
Transforming danger into love, he sings its many colors.  
He sees what he wants, wants what he sees,  
makes foreign lands home, turns the familiar  
into exotic patterns of ambient waves.  
His destiny is ours; we follow him into morning.  
Like the ghost of Hamlet's father, we remember him.

Fred Moramarco  
San Diego, Calif.

### A Fourteenth Way

So what is left when life is stripped  
Of metaphysic terms? The citrus  
Spray of orange peels torn  
And sweet flesh to share between us,

Coffee grounds and egg shells  
To fertilize the plants, and snails  
Drowned in shallow pans of beer  
To save the radishes and kale

For our salad. It's a shame  
That more could not remain behind  
Of Wallace Stevens than his words.  
When I read his work I find

A deep desire to visit him,  
Alive, and know him as a man  
Apart from his anthology.  
But his poetic water can

Never soak deep enough,  
And no amount of recitation  
Fills the empty chair. I hang  
A fragrant pouch for medication—

Rue, santolina, sage,  
And garlands of anise to numb  
The mourning heart, which promptly stops  
And asks, *Whose garden are these from?*

Carl Knickerbocker  
Lubbock, Tex.

Dear Wallace Stevens,

Again today someone described my writing  
as Stevensesque in tone, themes, my way  
of seeing visions of the world through windows.  
Second occurrence. Not a three-&-therefore-true.  
Still I hoped you might help explain nearness

of your distance in my words.  
Could it follow a journalist's detachment,  
or lawyerly fictions from unused law degrees:  
parallel avenues running through our lives?  
Maybe it is your studying Nietzsche's *god*

through unstained glass, a universe filled with  
ideas & images built like *Cathedrals by the sea*,  
culling the mind's focus from its fasting  
moment's prayers, beauty replacing  
the notion of beauty in your life.

There are connections unhinged if one twists  
the facts enough: I am like you in *absence  
of fantasia, & without human meaning*.  
Yet in verse, how could two men diverge  
more readily? Wallace, were you to write

fifty pages more about yourself,  
you would never appear within them,  
whereas even here in this poem I write  
about you (the *you* in your world,  
*I* in mine) I am everywhere.

Ace Boggess  
Huntington, W.Va.

**Three Notes for Wallace Stevens  
(On a Criticism of Place)**

Note: Poetry fills a window.  
A window is not poetry.

One stands by, sits by, waits by  
A window, and the world goes around,  
A race to the place where one looks.  
One looks at glass. A glass is a poem.

Note: A window in Florida is not  
The window in Connecticut.

Some others searched the name of the theater,  
Checked the vintage of the curtains,  
If curtains could be found, and  
You and I, we, stood by the glass.

Note: Place an actor in the spotlight.  
A theater will spring up around him.

The bird flying by places us by sound,  
You standing there, with your standing silence,  
Your silence springing and falling, not silence at all, and  
Me with the sounds of my singing, my singing sounds.

David Ritter  
Marietta, Ga.

## Reviews

### **Poetic Gesture: Myth, Wallace Stevens, and the Desirous Motions of Poetic Language.**

By Kristine S. Santilli. New York and London: Routledge, 2002.

The impulse that informs this book, which is preoccupied with the provenance of poetry, seems a visionary one. In its assertion that poetry embodies the deepest impulses of humanity, it offers itself as a defence of poetry and a celebration of the individual human impulse to assert itself in the face of annihilation. Beside some of the slicker products of cultural studies, it seems quite old-fashioned, embedded as it is in mythology and in archetypal gestures. Its concern is not with gestures *in* poetry, but with poetry itself as a kind of gesturing. Santilli draws heavily on classical literature, especially Homer, focusing on passages that dramatize fundamental human gestures. Rather than develop a linear argument in the usual way, she repeatedly returns to those key images, always amplifying her argument, always including more and more in an ever-widening circle, which is itself one of the first gestures she explicates.

Santilli marries her expertise in the explication of key moments in classical writing with her readings of modern European philosophers, especially Heidegger, from whom she derives the image of the heart, which becomes the inarticulate center of being that precedes poetry. At particular moments of crisis, an individual may be reduced to an acknowledgment of this irreducible aspect of being. From such a state of consciousness or pre-consciousness come the two essential gestures of poetry: one is gathering, the other, leaning. Gathering, while essentially a gathering inward, a repetitive iteration that constitutes the minimal, essential self, at the same time also constitutes the other—that is, the ideal other, a community or a readership for whom the gesture is designed. Leaning, in its various forms, is a two-way gesture: a gesture of desire and a hearkening back to unreachable origins. Since the origin of a poem lies in the silent, inarticulate heart, the articulation of the poem must involve a loss, the positing of an unbridgeable gap between the poem and the speechless origin that precedes it. It is against that inevitable loss that the poem gathers itself.

Hence, Santilli argues (following de Man), a poem's gesture is a gesture of mourning as well as a desirous leaning forward toward the other. In the last chapter of the book the argument is expanded to include death as the origin of poetry, death being manifest in the endless openness of the white space surrounding the poem. It is against that white space (yet intertwined with it) that the poem forgathers itself, individuating itself as it does so against the lineaments of a communal face, the face of myth. Such forgatherings imply an ethos of responsibility, for only that which is worthy of preservation, that which embodies the fundamental or best aspects of humanity, is worthy of poetry.

Although it is Heidegger who provides much of the terminology for the main points, the larger tradition of phenomenology informs the book as a whole. Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer, Lacan, Levinas, Blanchot, and Derrida all make contributions. One could sometimes wish for a more critical attitude to the philosopher giants; the only moment of contention occurs in the final chapter, where there is a brief contradiction of Levinas' claim that art mitigates responsibility by recreating and aestheticizing those beings that it seeks to retrieve. As one might expect, there are illustrations from Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, and the poem that serves as the key text of the final chapter, "The Face of Sorrow," was written by the Balkan poet Goran Simic. But Santilli also makes passing references to Donne, Wordsworth, Whitman, and Dickinson. Her aim is not to situate Stevens in a particular tradition, but to claim that his work, perhaps more than that of other poets, embodies fundamental and abiding human gestures.

Insofar as this book suggests more than it argues, it can be frustrating as well as stimulating. For example, having cogently argued that poetry is predicated on loss, Santilli does not explain why poetic gesture should therefore be a matter of mourning, rather than of, say, compensation. It is not so much in the minutiae of the argument as in the presentation of ideas and images that the strengths of this book lie: the reader will not easily forget the powerful meditations on destitute Odysseus' embedding himself in a primitive covering of leaves (the primary instance of gathering), on Orpheus' turning toward a dissolving Eurydice, on the imprint of Thetis' fingers on Achilles' heel that ensures his mortality, or on the complexly moving instance of Priam's kneeling before Achilles. There is a fascinating and insightful argument for poetry as a form of aegis and a valuable discussion of the figure of Stevens' figure of necessity, Ananke, and "his" grounding in classical mythology. A little-known myth about the naming of Pallas Athena is recounted in order to explicate the significance of naming as a residual gesture of remembering, which shapes the concluding discussion on the salvific impulse of poetry. One advantage of Santilli's investigation of key moments in classical mythology, it seems to me, is that it provides a model that frees the discussion from the constraints of Freudian theory and neo-Platonic philosophy, which have so frequently underpinned Stevens criticism that we barely notice them. Santilli has to argue afresh certain fundamental patterns of human perception, feeling, and behavior that have become stale through repeated iteration in outworn modes, and the result is an enhanced appreciation of the depth and power of our humanity.

Most of the book is devoted to the explication of this theory of poetic gesture. Stevens, as I have said, comes in primarily by way of illustration and is not the only poet so treated. Detailed explications are provided of "Angel Surrounded by Paysans," "Blanche McCarthy," "The Men That Are Falling," and "The Idea of Order at Key West," with references to many others (especially "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon" and several poems from "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction") and to "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words." Her reading of "The Idea of Order at Key West" near the end of the book is, I think, a particularly important one, with fresh insights about what it might mean to

understand "Inhuman, of the veritable ocean" (CP 128) or to make "the sky acutest at its vanishing" (CP 129). Yet the book as a whole suggests many more poems that might be fruitfully explicated with reference to her approach. For example, a reading of "The Plain Sense of Things" could be enriched by her discussion of Ananke, and her depiction of the communal face glimpsed behind the individual face of a particular poem surely illuminates Stevens' "inanimate, difficult visage" (CP 388), from the end of the first section of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction."

Mention of Ananke brings us to the task facing Stevens, since, according to Santilli, "the material necessity of nature and the second necessity of assigning linguistic significance to it have evolved into a problem so daunting, it is beyond even the simple clarifying slice of an imaginative gaze" (63–64). Stevens must achieve a balance between two undesirable positions: between language embraced for its own sake, which deprives perception of substance or veers too far from "reality," and the steely, petrifying gaze of Ananke that preempts language and everything else. In effect, "one must be threatened with a transformation to stone in order to move toward linguistic transparency and to a semblance of origin, to 'a self of parents that have never died, / Whose lives return, simply, upon our lips, / Their words and ours; in what we see . . .'" (68). Thus, Stevens is impelled toward poetic gesture by a necessary but dangerous encounter. Without it, he is unable to create the body's power to gesture. What saves him from petrification is memory, which is "as much an act of body as it is an act of mind" (70).

This is not an easy book to read. It is not a ready source of pithy quotations, nor does it move in a linear, logical fashion from point to point—there being, of course, no reason why it should. There is, however, a fine line between wordplay and the slippage of meaning that damages an argument, and Santilli does not always manage to walk it. In particular, the extension of modern European philosophy through the work of various American critics and thinkers, including R. P. Blackmur and, more particularly, Allan Grossman and David McNeill, tends to result in a broadening of terms rather than a finer honing of them. The facility with which references to "the other" become "the Other" and to qualities that are "always already there" is bound to alienate some readers, and the tone, especially toward the beginning, sometimes seems sentimental. Still, serious readers of poetry should derive much from this meditation, which celebrates poetry as an essential, humanizing activity.

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### **The American Love Lyric after Auschwitz and Hiroshima.**

By Barbara L. Estrin. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

Barbara Estrin's study of postwar American lyric poetry proceeds from an insight current in cultural studies: that representation reflects its culture in its

totality, including the genocidal barbarism that marks twentieth-century history. She reads the love lyric by Wallace Stevens, Robert Lowell, and Adrienne Rich as an allegory of a postwar problematic of representation, in which the lyric form is ideologically congruent with genocide. Her poets remake poetic form as a way to resist and overturn the dark impact of the traditions in which they write.

For Estrin, to write a lyric is to invoke a form imprinted with implacable prescriptive force by Petrarch, or at least by what has become Petrarchism. Against the conventional scholarly wisdom that Petrarchism's sway ended some time toward the end of the nineteenth century, Estrin asserts that these poets all struggle with the Petrarchan form. In addition, Estrin reads Petrarch in an idiosyncratic way, so that what is Petrarchan is much more than an accumulation of tropes and themes of love unattainable. (Estrin's earlier study, *Laura: Uncovering Gender and Genre in Wyatt, Donne, and Marvell* [Duke UP, 1994], focuses mainly on issues of gender, on the way the tradition objectifies and cancels the female object of desire.) In brief, Estrin argues that Petrarchan poetics stands at the beginning point of a historical line, the logical end point of which is the Holocaust and Hiroshima. Petrarchism is destructive (she refers to a "destructive mechanism" in the *Rime sparse* [page 11]); it contains a language of hatred (11). In the Petrarchan poem, a language of desire attempts to conjure the absent love object in order to produce her for the consumption of the desiring eye. In that same act, however, the poem succeeds only in erasing, appropriating, and effectively destroying the other, destruction implicit, Estrin believes, in the two great events of mass slaughter of the last century.

Estrin's two chapters on Stevens treat "Three Academic Pieces," "The Auroras of Autumn," "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," and "The World as Meditation." In addition, she opens the first, theoretical chapter with a discussion of "So-And-So Reclining on her Couch." Estrin claims that Stevens's "So-And-So" alludes "to a long history of violation, and, automatically, remaining within the confines of a culturally determined and already fixed design: A, B, C" (21). Her analysis places Stevens in the role of a poet who, more than objectifying the woman as the tradition would demand, turns the tables on the tradition by objectifying his own position. Although the couch is the place where the woman as object sits, Stevens' "So-And-So" has been fully abstracted from that tradition so that more than the woman it is the poet "as desiring artist" (26) who is represented in the poem.

This Stevens uses a full range of rhetorical and linguistic tools to break out of the monstrous straightjacket bequeathed to him by Petrarchan tradition. He also, in Estrin's estimation, frankly confronts his own role in bringing to life an imagination as damaging and destructive—"As grim as it is benevolent" (*CP* 417) in Stevens' words—as it is life affirming. What saves Stevens is how he reimagines the oxymoron, a term that Estrin repeats throughout the study like a mantra. What Stevens does with the figure is to destabilize it, partly by multiplying it and, in Estrin's terms, in "The Auroras of Autumn" canto VI, "project a sequence of pulsating stages as the oxymorons flow into each other. The new image suggests interchange rather than annihilation" (61).

Oddly enough, Estrin never refers directly to the animating image of the poem, the natural phenomenon of auroras; she keeps her analysis abstract. The crux of Estrin's analysis is embodied in the last six lines of canto VI, where Stevens' speaker admits being afraid. Estrin understands the speaker to be the poet, Stevens the man as poet: he is afraid of his power to create and name the other, to name the object of his desire, his "So-And-So," and only when his poetic "house" is destroyed by fire, when "this named thing nameless is / And is destroyed" (CP 416), can true poetic justice be done. Estrin calls this a "female impulse to resist representation" (65) and wonders whether in the face of this powerful, perhaps debilitating recognition, the poet can indeed go on writing. She echoes here the often-repeated statement of Theodor Adorno (whom she quotes early in the book) that after Auschwitz there can be no lyric poetry. Estrin's rejoinder in her reading is that, yes, the lyric represents an absurdity in the face of history, but a necessary one. It is made necessary by a Stevens who dramatizes in his verse the violence that lyric poetry traditionally embodies and recapitulates and who also constructs counter architectures in his verse, poetic strategies that resist the lyric form's violence.

Estrin's treatment of Lowell, Rich, and Beckett (who makes a surprise cameo appearance in the book's penultimate chapter) pushes her thesis further into the postwar period, finding in Lowell a poet self-conscious of his own role in creating a world that affirms a "sustained belief in independent female desire" (144) and in Rich, a poet with more self-consciousness than either Stevens or Lowell in "her ambivalent position as representer" (153). In the end, Estrin believes that all three poets equally participate in a project of undermining lyric's more menacing impact on human culture, the force of lyric's subjecting the other to a fixed, deadening gaze. Her thesis in a nutshell is expressed in the afterword: "Poets know there is something that gets away and that what gets away might save us in the end. . . . Siding with what gets away at the end, Stevens, Lowell, and Rich admit to the repression at the beginning. If the Petrarchan poem involves the 'desubjectification' that triggers the genocidal mentality, its rhythms defy the containments it crystallizes" (210). In this line of thought, Estrin comes as close as anywhere in the book to claiming that lyric poetry in the Petrarchan tradition actually has a causal role in the mindset that sets genocide in motion—in the Holocaust and the dropping of a thermonuclear device at the end of the war.

Estrin's book is one of large ideas. What makes the book, finally, less than convincing is the leap from those ideas to the poetry itself, particularly in the Stevens and Lowell chapters. Estrin over-determines figures that could have a much wider, or more general, significance. For example, the simile in "Auroras of Autumn" of wind knocking "like a rifle-butt against the door" (CP 414) Estrin reads as a direct reference to the Gestapo. Unfortunately, she only asserts it, as if it did not require, perhaps, some evidence. It comes off as a connection merely convenient to her argument rather than determinative. In addition, the book is marred by a poor job of editing, one that undermines the force of the argument itself. For example, in discussing the first five cantos of "Auroras," Estrin makes an offhand reference to Kasimir Malevich, the Ukrainian painter, in a sentence that is already intensely complex. The reference—

“like the Malevich ‘white square’ ” (50)—appears to suggest that Estrin has already introduced and explained the object of reference. She has not, and will not for another five pages, which causes the argument to get lost. When she finally introduces the context in which Malevich’s suprematist work has meaning for her study, Malevich appears only as an embedded reference in a passage by the French theorist Jean François Lyotard. Perhaps it is appropriate that the painter of nonobjective representation should “appear” in Estrin’s text as an absence, but her study is filled with such odd moments. Melanie Klein makes an appearance in the book as a major thread but is never quoted herself. Even Petrarch has a strange ghostly presence, since throughout the actual readings of the poetry Estrin often refers only to the *Rime sparse* by number: her arguments are stronger when she actually quotes from the poems.

Estrin asks big questions: “Do dismembered bodies in Ovid refer us forward to the piled up corpses that are so much a part of the late-twentieth-century imago?” (5). For Estrin, her trio of U.S. poets feels the weight of this tradition as a burden. These poets take pains to invent poetic strategies that would undo the foundations bequeathed to them by history. Unfortunately, her readings are too often debilitated by a method that takes assertion for analysis, addition for proof. Hers is the, by now familiar, feminist mode of privileging a *female* “both/and” mode of thought over a *male* “either/or” mode. Her study proceeds on that basis by piling up analogies, comparisons, and reiterations of terms as if the sheer weight of these examples and terms could, in themselves, undertake the analysis and exposition. They do not. It is commendable that Estrin raises these questions and would enter a debate, but the mode of discourse present in the book renders those questions mute and the debate ineffectual.

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### **Gathered Beneath the Storm: Wallace Stevens, Nature and Community.**

By Justin Quinn. Dublin and Chester Springs, Pa.: University College  
Dublin Press/Dufour Editions, 2002.

In *Gathered Beneath the Storm: Wallace Stevens, Nature and Community*, Justin Quinn offers us a reassessment of Wallace Stevens’ corpus in terms of the connections between nature, community, and art. Quinn expresses his unhappiness with the state of contemporary criticism and rejoices in the prospect that criticism has moved toward connecting the poem with the poet and his world. Moreover, he counts himself among the younger generation writing books that “renew our sense of the particularly literary aspects of poems, while also attending to political contexts and the ways in which poetry matters to lives” (1–2). He questions historicist, feminist, and deconstructionist criticism and in his introduction suggests that poetry should attend to political considerations, yet he continues to present a discourse distinct from politics.

Quinn further argues the extent to which nature allows Stevens to engage, not escape, societal concerns. When he wishes to think about politics and ideology, Quinn maintains, Stevens “turns to the space of nature” (2), yet he “seeks a visionary balance between the city and nature” (4), so that in exploring pastoral landscapes Stevens meditates on cultural and political meaning, not on an escape from them. As Stevens contemplates nature’s space, he ponders ideology. Additionally, Quinn makes it abundantly clear that nature and landscape for Stevens are “not sylvan idylls to salve our troubled minds” (11) but experiences that inspire the poet to think about politics, history, and community concerns. And, he critically continues, previous criticism has neglected the role that the natural world plays in political and human history. Although an inheritor of the romantics, those who failed to engage society as they escaped into nature, Stevens employed transcendent nature to connect with the world, society, or what Quinn calls the “enclosures” (4).

Quinn sparks interest when he discusses the extent to which enclosure and open horizon function in Stevens’ poetry, stressing that Stevens is not a poet of the city but one who identifies nature as “the site of the spirit’s intensest rendezvous, the place where access to ‘reality’ is acutest” (86–87), while the “interview between nature and human fictions—be they houses, paintings, or cities—is an interview between a plentitude of interpretive possibilities” (95) and that which Quinn fails to designate. Quinn declares that Stevens’ “ultimate dissatisfaction” is to be “ensconced in the space of the town” (105). To this end, his explication of “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” turns on the idea that the community possesses a different relationship to landscape and nature, and it assures us that New Haven amounts to “nothing if the horizon of nature is excised” (110).

This nature/enclosure dialectic is worthy of consideration until one discovers that the natural world, site of revelation and social meaning, provides one with “pleasures, indulgences and infatuation” (60), moments that must be remembered upon a return to the enclosure. But Quinn never informs us as to how those “moments of exaltation,” those “flashes of validation of the life of the spirit” (123), transform the enclosure, the society, and the town—the world beyond nature. The dialectical “enclosures”/“open horizon” theory between community and the natural world promises a synthesis Quinn fails to divulge. Although he reasons that the sojourner in nature has been renewed, he does not reveal how the sojourner subsequently rejuvenates community. Indeed, this rhetoric recalls the 1960s generation, who went into the woods and then returned to the world without offering much constructive good so that in time the world either destroyed or converted them. On the other hand, recollecting what had been experienced in nature, the romantics, at the least, upon returning to the community, although they may not have renewed society, renewed themselves in the quiet of their little enclosures.

Quinn asserts that Stevens offers us images of ourselves in community, repeatedly insisting that the poet’s travels to *campagna* result in social meaning that can be carried back to community for the purpose of influencing community. Yet, he cautions, “The hard work of course begins when the book of poetry is put down and lasting public institutions and laws must be built and

maintained. Poetry and art in general will never really help when making those decisions. . . ." (139). However, he assures, it is invaluable "for the vision it gives" (139). One wonders, what is the point of Quinn's argument? If art and poetry can accomplish little to transform community, where is the overarching synthesis? Without striving to resolve this paradox, Quinn apparently posits a contradiction, not only doubting the sojourner's eventual success but also fearing the "counter-examples" (139), wherein the "concentration camp commandant listen[s] to Mozart" (139).

In the fifth and final chapter, Quinn in a broad sweep analyzes family, nation, and race in Stevens' poetry. Most astonishing is the meager ten-page discussion he devotes to family and its association with the past, although, in fairness, he admits that after 1942 "there is a more circumspect filial piety towards tradition and the past" (112) and a sense of "community, with its ceremonies, family ties, and transmission of cultural and ethical values" (118). Exactly. Why, then, the abbreviated discussion? To be sure, he too rapidly passes over *Transport to Summer* with its consequent familial associations and Pennsylvania references. As for the issue of nation, he argues that it, too, "is a kind of enclosure that structures our perception of space," but unfortunately it can also "obscure our apprehension of where we live" (125).

One further observes that Quinn seems discomfited because, to cite an example, Stevens failed to connect his Pennsylvania places with America the way W. B. Yeats connected Ben Bulbin as place with Ireland. But Quinn overlooks the fact that Stevens considered himself, at least in part, to be Pennsylvania Dutch, people who traditionally attach themselves to the local rather than the wider nation. Quinn reserves his discussion of race until the end of the book. There, with regard to African-Americans, he charges Stevens with a "casual racism" (140), though he wisely warns that a dismissal of Stevens on such grounds would be a mistake. What is more, the poet's treatment of women, the poor, and the suffering, Quinn contends, fails to move beyond the stereotypical—never mentioning that Stevens was a product of his age and not the fruit of the race-and-minority conscious 1960s. Quinn's attempt to cover too much in too little space strikes this reader as the weakness of Chapter 5, if not the entire book. Both family and nation, with Quinn's attendant discussion of the native and the immigrant, deserve at least individual chapters. The marginally delineated subject of race and minorities warrants a separate study.

The book suffers equally from convoluted thought processes and untidiness in form and mechanics. In short, slovenliness characterizes the writing—a style that impels the reader's ongoing return to sentences that are often rife with errors and syntactic confusion, frustrating meaning. What follows is by no means an exhaustive consideration of these failures: "It is an exercise *than* can often" (80; my italics), or "the city with *it* different" (90; my italics). In an instance of interpretative ping-pong, Quinn asserts that in the "Complete" and "completed scene" (CP 378) of "Credences of Summer," Stevens expresses "the great need we have for our past" (121) yet "simultaneously says good-bye to the past" (121). He contends that the scene's completion refers in part to genealogy in the poetry. Shortly after, however, Quinn backpedals by de-

claring genealogy would play a less “prominent role in the poetry to come” (121), so that the “good-bye to the past” is not a goodbye at all. Indeed, even Quinn admits that Stevens is attentive to “lineage” (121) in the poem “The Auroras of Autumn.” He might have judiciously added that “lineage”(related as it is to genealogy and the past) as image and theme appears in several poems of *The Auroras of Autumn* as well as *The Rock*. It is unfortunate that typographical blips, slipshod syntax (including punctuation mishaps), as well as hit-or-miss proofreading impede comprehension, conveying the impression that the book was hastily written and prematurely published. Too often Quinn needlessly references material previously presented or previews material he intends to discuss, a practice that results in redundant commentary that fails to advance the study. The anemic conclusion is deeply disappointing—a scant three-quarters of a page—and only restates the premises of a 143-page volume.

Finally, Quinn fails to engage the proposition that “supreme fiction” represents poetry, the written word—that which alone Stevens possessed at the end of his life, a time when he no longer was able to walk the streets of New Haven, roam the beaches at Key West, or climb the blue hills surrounding Reading. His singular consolation, if one takes Stevens’ poetry as seriously—and unesoterically—as he himself did, seems to have been the “poem that took the place of a mountain” (*CP* 512), an idea Quinn ought not to have so casually passed by.

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### **The Grace and the Severity of the Ideal: John Dewey and the Transcendent.**

By Victor Kestenbaum. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002.

When Victor Kestenbaum grapples with issues that relate to John Dewey’s philosophical challenges regarding transcendence, sublimity, imagination, and ideality, it comes as no surprise that he crosses from pragmatic theory to poetry and appeals to Wallace Stevens as a means of anchoring his perceptive analysis. Kestenbaum’s analysis of Dewey invokes a slippery spiritual atmosphere suffusing an otherwise empirical terrain. The book’s final chapter, the only one to consider Stevens directly, is titled “Dewey, Wallace Stevens and the ‘Difficult Inch.’ ” In it Kestenbaum concedes that “I shall not be looking for problems in Stevens but rather looking for a phrase, a thought, an idea which helps to provoke a closer view of Dewey’s problems with imagination” (201).

If Stevens is tangential to this study, he also pervades it. Although Kestenbaum’s purpose is not to intend to establish direct lines from Dewey to Stevens (Stevens mentions Dewey in passing only once in his *Letters*), or from Stevens to pragmatism, the links are nonetheless drawn, and they emphasize once again, however incidentally, the convergence of American pragmatism with

the poetry of Wallace Stevens. Although a fuller study of Dewey and Stevens may be waiting to happen, it is Kestenbaum's immediate challenge to consider as essential to Dewey's philosophy the "transcending more," a concept that Kestenbaum identifies as the "philosophical center of what Stevens called 'my reality-imagination complex.'" Throughout his philosophical writings, the issue of the "transcending more" poses a "profound challenge to Dewey's empiricism/naturalism/pragmatism" (202). Kestenbaum describes Dewey as "deeply uncertain about the status of imaginative acts" (201). Tracing this uncertainty, he juxtaposes in the final chapter of his study the poet of the ordinary with the philosopher of the ordinary, and he asks where one should stand, "pragmatist or not," to behold the sublime.

We are reminded in reading Kestenbaum that Stevens suffered no ambiguities parallel to Dewey's with regard to the preeminence of imaginative acts. Within the "Essays on Reality and the Imagination" that comprise *The Necessary Angel*, Stevens constructs a subtle dialectic between the philosophical and poetical worlds. "[N]o one is needed," he affirms in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," "to tell us that poetry and philosophy are akin" (NA 30). In remarking this, he has already iterated in the same essay several of the familiar propositions that place him squarely in a philosophical tradition that includes William James and Dewey: that the imagination "loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real" (NA 6); that the imagination "has the strength of reality or none at all" (NA 7); that the relationship between reality and the imagination is not an issue of "grotesque extremes," but a question of "precise equilibrium" (NA 9). Kestenbaum's study convinces that Dewey lacked Stevens' sense of equilibrium between reality and the imagination, that he "did not have a steady and clear vision" (4) of how to incorporate transcendent visibilities and invisibilities into a practical life. It becomes part of his purpose to locate and explain in Dewey's writing the tensions between these apparent extremes that others either ignore or simplify.

Far from being a "well-behaved" philosophy, Dewey's pragmatism "transgresses" expectations. Kestenbaum argues that readers should be "prepared to be surprised" (27) by John Dewey. The nine essays that comprise his study, most of them either about Dewey or about others crucially inspired by him, divulge several of these surprises. Principal among them is the contention that Dewey's form of pragmatism, more complicated than purely naturalistic interpretations that render ideals as mere "tools" in the natural landscape, defines an important place for the ideal, the intangible, and the transcendent. Kestenbaum dismisses the characteristic view that Dewey decisively "breaks" from a period of idealism extending from 1882 to 1903; he also debunks the corollary view that allows tracings of Dewey's early idealism to "foreshadow" the later philosophy. Far from rejecting idealism outright, according to Kestenbaum, Dewey "recasts" his understanding of the intangibility of ideal meanings and thereby focuses "some of the most difficult, interesting, and enduring issues in the empirical and theoretical study of culture, politics, religion, and education" (4). A primary issue for Kestenbaum is to challenge the familiar assumption that says pragmatism has no place for transcendence.

Referring to his collection of essays as “pragmatic occasions of transcendent and intangible ideals” (8), Kestenbaum expresses impatience with Dewey scholarship that values what a text explicitly says above what it did not or could not say. He prefers to view Dewey’s style and vision as a “mixture of the linear and the painterly” (9), and he professes a greater interest in the lights and shadows of Dewey’s thinking as opposed to lines and boundaries. To emphasize the latter is to miss in Dewey’s philosophy the possibility of a “transcendence-penetrated mundanity” (21) and to see him as a mere empiricist rather than as an “*excellent empiricist*” (27).

Dewey’s excellence partially lies in his ability to replace a “monolithic or consistent” naturalism with a naturalism characterized by “porousness” (67). Yet to be porous is to be elusive. In cultivating a version of pragmatism that can sponsor “intimations of the ideal,” Kestenbaum here and there encounters the challenge of seeming to have to save the philosopher from his own caution and imprecision. At times the impression cast is that Dewey could hardly control the implications of his own theses or the apparent contradictions implied in them. For instance, in the chapter titled “The Pragmatic Struggle for the Good,” Dewey locates “the intersection of the ideal and the actual,” but suddenly the ideal becomes “too strong a force,” and the philosopher “loses control of it fairly quickly” (45). In the same chapter, Dewey’s tentative “first move” in the direction of “sense-transcending ideals” is depicted as “qualified and hesitant and is almost retracted by a less than compelling distinction” (46). These tentative excursions portray a philosopher fully willing to test the validity of his hypothesis by entering arenas not implied in his fundamental assertions.

Discovering these “intimations” of transcendence defines the significance of Kestenbaum’s accomplishments in this study. Taking on and subduing the arguments of considerable critical giants (like Richard Poirier), Kestenbaum portrays Dewey as developing a philosophy that enabled him ultimately to “make a plea for faith in the invisible ideal which Santayana himself might have admired” (182). In a crucial chapter he titles “Faith and the Unseen,” Kestenbaum explicates the passage “Religion versus the Religious” from Dewey’s book *A Common Faith*. He proposes that in this passage Dewey makes what George Steiner called a “‘wager on transcendence’ ” (175). The sky of Dewey’s “problems with the imagination” seems suddenly to clear when he makes this key statement: “The idea of a thoroughgoing and deep-seated harmonizing of the self with the Universe (as a name for the totality of conditions with which the self is connected) operates only through imagination” (182). To this Kestenbaum adds: “‘Only’ marks the spot for Dewey: it is this and nothing else.” One is reminded again of Stevens: “It is a question, now, / Of final belief. . . . It is time to choose” (CP 250).

Kestenbaum carefully distinguishes Dewey from Stevens in their approaches to the imagination. He cites Stevens’ letter to Bernard Heringman in which the poet admits he can believe in the imagination for a long time and then can switch to reality and believe in it alone. For Dewey, reality and the imagination intersect and are integrated, each responding to the other’s fullest weight and significance. For Stevens, they can be interdependent without

being integrated. What the philosopher and poet have in common is that neither “complacently accepts a more which exceeds ‘human things’ or ‘human voice’ ” (225). Kestenbaum appropriately depicts Dewey as “taxing imagination almost to the transcendental breaking point,” yet he “still loops its energies back to everything that can be seen, thought, and done in nature” (182). If sometimes Kestenbaum’s essays circle and weave in directions one would never expect them to take, the effect is a meticulous reading that breaks new ground in Dewey scholarship while it provides secondarily for readers of Wallace Stevens an awareness of deeper relationships that need to be cultivated.

Like the role of the philosopher, the poet’s role is “to help people to live their lives” (NA 30). In “The Figure of the Youth as a Virile Poet,” Stevens establishes his preference in the dialectic. If philosophy approaches truth through reason and poetry approaches truth through the imagination, then we “must conceive of poetry as at least the equal of philosophy” (NA 41–42). However, since the poet through his poems must satisfy “both the reason and the imagination” (NA 42) while the philosopher satisfies reason alone, the conclusion is inevitable: “poetry, which we have been thinking of as at least the equal of philosophy, may be its superior” (NA 43).

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### **La suprême fiction de Wallace Stevens: Une réappropriation de l’ordinaire sur terre.**

By Christian Calliyanis. Paris-Budapest-Torino: L’Harmattan, 2001.

Reading a French study of Wallace Stevens continues to invite minor forms of culture shock. We enter familiar territory but in strangely defamiliarizing ways that recall how much of our own comment on Stevens is intrinsically reader-dependent and an act of cultural translation. Stevens’ poetry is itself a world, even a kind of culture, that we must learn to understand and appreciate. Filtered through French lenses, this poetic terrain regains some of its originally surprising, idiosyncratic landscape. In the specific case of this book, the filtering is in fact more complex than simply “French” (if such a thing may ever be said to be simple), since the author was born of a Greek father and a German mother and started writing, at age 17, in London. After numerous voyages and professions—so the short biography tells us—he published his first collection of poems in Athens. At age 49, he obtained his Ph.D. at the Sorbonne in Paris. The above book is the revised version of his dissertation.

Nobody need come to this study in search of interesting new facts. This is immediately apparent from the merely rhetorical exactitude that greets us in the opening line: “The public work of Wallace Stevens covers exactly the first half of the twentieth century” (7; translations from the original French are mine). A few lines later the *Collected Poems* is dated 1953 instead of 1954, which in turn is followed by the obfuscating statement that “[a]t 36, after a brief

attempt at journalism, [Stevens] enters the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company" (7). As a seeming provocation to all biographically oriented critics, Calliyannis goes on to claim that the "effacement" of Stevens' person in his poetry was "total" and that "[t]he writing alludes to nothing that would be verifiable outside [his] universe of letters" (8). When a few pages later we find a chronological list of the long poems in which "The Comedian as the Letter C" is supposed to predate "Sunday Morning," we know that fact-checking and material historical contexts are not what this book is all about.

Nor is this a book that is user-friendly by American academic standards. Without either bibliography or index it forms a dark and deep textual woods in which trees cannot be singled out for inspection or found again without extensive note-taking. The French reader is not even enlightened on the meaning of abbreviations like CP, OP, L, or NA, which are used throughout. Given the absence of a bibliography, it becomes hard also to check why Calliyannis should believe he can call James Longenbach's historicist study "one of the rarest of its kind" (19). His clear lack of interest in a materially anchored Stevens is further reflected in the cover of the book, for the picture on the front throws the modernist topic a couple of millennia back in time. We are greeted by an Etruscan bust of Hermes, mysteriously smiling at us from the sixth century B.C., presumably brought here through some distant association with the ephebe at the outset of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction."

Yet if such things may be slightly disorientating, the book has surprising features in a more positive sense as well. One thing it does contain, for instance, is an appendix with a personally crafted, full translation into French of the aforementioned "Notes"—the central poem to which these more than 350 pages are devoted. In his introduction, Calliyannis shows himself convinced of the value of undertaking such a translation beyond its practical purpose: to him it is an exercise that helps open up the very "pensée" and poetics of Stevens' work through a direct confrontation with specific technical problems. What is more, the attempt may be held to contribute to an illumination of the very language (in this case French) into which the translation was made. Obviously, Calliyannis is much more on home ground when making such claims than when dismissing the relevance of material-historical contexts.

His is a study that will speak above all to readers who prefer extended appropriations of specific poems, in particular of Stevens' most famous long cycle, "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction." The novelty of the readings, to be sure, is limited: Calliyannis leans heavily on the published work of Helen Vendler, Harold Bloom, and Eleanor Cook. Yet he also extends the work of these critics by a wide margin, spelling out, reconceptualizing, and modifying their more compact interpretations. What he thus offers is, arguably, the most elaborate systematic coverage of "Notes" to date. At a very slow pace, he walks us through the text, organizing his reading under six chapter headings: "The First Idea," "The Permanence of Change," "The Modalities of Enchantment," "Imagination and Repetition," "Allegories of Fiction," and "Anatomy of Monotony, Divinity of Difference." The theoretical underpin-

ning of this careful analysis is a mix of the phenomenological hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur and Derridean deconstruction.

Perhaps unsurprisingly for somebody who submitted his dissertation at the Sorbonne, Calliyannis takes Stevens' prediction that "They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne" (*CP* 406) to be nonironic. He is the kind of critic who does not hesitate to rename "The Man on the Dump," less poetically, "Of the Ironic Considered as a Circumlocution of the Serious" (356; my capitalization). Whether he thus always meets Stevens' challenge to "get it straight" is for every reader to decide. What is certain is that these mature and dense pages repay close scrutiny, even if they may not, in the final analysis, cause us to forget the poet's own resistant words about an earlier systematic analysis of his work: "For me it is a way of synthesizing things that I am never likely to synthesize for myself. It is always somebody else that does this sort of thing. . . . I have no wish to arrive at a conclusion" (*L* 710).

To the extent that a critical study nevertheless needs some sort of conclusion, Calliyannis proves himself wholly up to his task: his transcultural, comparative approach helps us take our mental distance again from Stevens' enterprise in ways that criticism from within the United States, even at its most self-reflective, rarely accomplishes. Focusing on historical contexts of a more immaterial, cultural-philosophical sort, Calliyannis points out how Stevens' American background made him contest not so much the *idea* of God (as so many French and other European writers did) as the *imagination's* producing God and the very *capacity of words* to construct a fiction that is beneficial to humankind. He contends that it requires a peculiarly American sort of agnosticism to be able to suspend one's disbelief, as Stevens did, and come up with a "poetic idea of God that does not lapse into either mysticism or triviality" (351). In "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens expressed his belief in poetry in "a frontal, ironic, and detached way" (351) that is apparently unimaginable in French literature. As with Calliyannis' contribution to the 25th anniversary issue of this journal, we stand to learn a lot about poetic-artistic differences between the United States and France through such synoptic formulations of differently conceptualized cultures. In an age that is beginning to understand the need for transnational and intercultural thinking, critics of Stevens would do well to brush up on their knowledge of French to engage with Christian Calliyannis' complex book.

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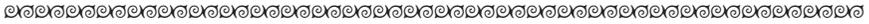
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