

# The Wallace Stevens Journal



# The Wallace Stevens Journal

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*Significant Landscapes*  
(after "Six Significant Landscapes")  
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# Wallace Stevens and the World of Tea

NICO ISRAEL

## I

WHEN THE SPEAKER OF "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon" concludes, "I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw / Or heard or felt came not but from myself; / And there I found myself more truly and more strange" (*CP* 65), he implicitly links tea with perception, sensation, self-knowledge, and a strange kind of truth: significant claims for something so apparently insignificant.<sup>1</sup> Tea might initially seem rather like other objects in Wallace Stevens' poetry—jar, tree, or rock, for example—in that it hovers the border between imagination and reality, seminal terms in Stevens' own formulation of his poetics. But tea is far more worldly: both raw product of nature and refined product of culture, it has an economic and social history, comes from and passes through particular geographical locations, and is aesthetic in that it is at once a source of pleasure and a tasteful substance that enters (and leaves) the human body.

Tea, as ceremony and commodity, infuses both periods of Stevens' poetic life: the early period leading up to the publication of *Harmonium*, associated with aestheticism, sonic experimentation, occasional imagism, and, importantly, orientalism, and the later period of longer, more overtly philosophical poems often involving a display of connoisseurship.<sup>2</sup> In fact, an examination of the figure and fact of tea reveals an important connection between orientalist aestheticism and philosophically inclined connoisseurship in Stevens' work and allows us to reconsider the relation between his earlier and later poetic output. More broadly, Stevens' sense of place, as expressed in and through tea, itself discloses something strange, but true, about the relation between aesthetics and global politics as they shift over the course of Stevens' poetic career. In short, tea tells us much about Stevens' world, and about our own.

## II

That tea has thus far escaped attention from Stevens critics seems odd, especially considering that one of the two or three earliest poems to be written is "Tea," which Stevens placed second-to-last in *Harmonium*.<sup>3</sup> One

of Stevens' most overtly imagistic poems, "Tea" is economical enough to be quoted in its entirety:

When the elephant's-ear in the park  
Shrivelled in frost,  
And the leaves on the paths  
Ran like rats,  
Your lamp-light fell  
On shining pillows,  
Of sea-shades and sky-shades,  
Like umbrellas in Java. (CP 112–13)

The second-person audience of this complex poem is elusive. If we take the implied "you" to indicate a human listener (a guest or perhaps a lover), then that listener's illuminating presence transports the undesignated speaker out of a particular place—presumably the autumnal northeast of the United States, where there is a park with paths strewn with dead leaves—to an exotic, colorful elsewhere associated with the light, sea, and sky of the East, engendering a warming that occurs, paradoxically, under the shade of an imagined umbrella. On the other hand, if the "you" of the poem is tea itself, then it is tea's own "lamp-light," the light it carries within itself, that falls on shining pillows of shades, creating its own warming.

The ambivalence of addressee extends to the poem's portrayal of geography. Carl Van Vechten, noting that "every line" of the poem "in some way conveyed the impression of tea," claimed that the penultimate line, which logically reads as an enjambment but is preceded and followed by commas, was originally "Of teashades and seashades" (Van Vechten 43).<sup>4</sup> This variant would change the feeling of lightness and space given off by "sky-shades," but it would not blunt the powerful yet confusing force of the final simile, "Like umbrellas in Java." Java, the name for the central island of present-day Indonesia, was at the time the poem was written the prized possession of the Dutch East Indies, a colonial formation that emerged out of the spice trade and then the tea trade, though large scale cultivation and production of tea began there, as in most of the world (even in British India), only in the early nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> "Java" is significant in the poem not for its association with colonialism or the productivity of modernity, but for the opposite reason: the soothing, protective property that the listener or tea provides the speaker or taster. The logic of the concluding simile is either (1) that the sea-shades and sky-shades themselves are like umbrellas in that they offer a form of shade (which word also picks up a sense of color); or (2), more satisfactorily but running contrary to the grammar and punctuation of the lines, that the lamp light of tea or the listener fell as light falls on umbrellas in Java; or (3), least satisfactorily, that "Your lamp light fell on shining pillows" in the way that umbrellas in Java *fall*.

But what, one may wonder, are umbrellas in Java “like”? Are they, as one suspects, protection from the sun (even though much of Java is actually a rainforest) or from the rain? If the former, why not “parasol,” a word Stevens used in the title of an unpublished early poem, “The Ballade of the Pink Parasol”? Was Stevens just entranced with the sound of “umbrellas in Java”? If so, would not the poem work better without the “like,” which seems as unnecessary as a “like” in Ezra Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro” between “The apparition of these faces in the crowd” and “Petals on a wet, black bough” (*Personae* 109), a poem whose elegant brevity and oriental veneer clearly influenced the early Stevens? I interrogate these lines not merely to point out the nonsensical quality of the simile and thereby to reinforce the notion that, as in Frank Lentricchia’s parody of early Stevens criticism, the *Harmonium* poems are “on principle mindless: maybe gemlike, but also without point” (207). On the contrary, the confusion—perhaps we can call it a catachresis (itself a kind of rhetorical “falling”)—points up a quandary concerning the relation between tea and umbrellas in Java and, indeed, between tea and the poetry of Wallace Stevens.<sup>6</sup>

In this sense—returning again to the beginning of the poem—what is crucial to understand is that even in the unidentified “park,” presumably a figure for Western rationality or “order,” “elephant’s ear” and rodential nature (leaves scattered by the wind, echoing the idea of tea leaves) disturb that order, as if themselves awaiting the falling light of the guest/lover or of tea itself. This falling light offers, for the speaker or drinker, a kind of *protection*: like umbrellas in Java.<sup>7</sup> The “shining pillows” seem simultaneously inside a luxurious interior and outside in the luminous sky in the Dutch East Indies. In other words, there is an East in the West, or an outside that can be brought inside, and tea embodies the comforting revelation that is always already—potentially—there.

We find an analogous form of imagined geography in “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon,” *Harmonium*’s other “tea” poem. Initially, the poem seems to have little to do with tea at all. Its concern, arguably, is what it might mean to find oneself “more truly and more strange” in a world of one’s own making. Aside from its appearance in the title, the word “tea” does not surface in the poem; instead, a rhyming word, “sea,” appears twice (“What was the sea whose tide swept through me there?” and “I was myself the compass of that sea” [CP 65]). The poem juxtaposes the limitless vagrancy of the sea with a kind of temporary placement or refuge (as well as, perhaps, luxury) associated with a *palaz* and with tea, which placement entails “finding oneself” in and as a world. The thrust of the poem is ecstatic delight, a momentary gushing: “Out of my mind the golden ointment rained, / And my ears made the blowing hymns they heard” (CP 65). As Anthony Whiting points out, “both the sense of creativity and the sense of pleasure expressed in ‘Tea at the Palaz of Hoon’ differ from the kind of creativity and pleasure expressed in the irony of skeptical engagement” (97). Those unskeptical, absorbing senses are generated, in part, by tea,

with its ability to encompass space. Tea is part of the “there” where the speaker finds himself “more truly and more strange.”

But where is the there, and why *palaz* and not simply palace? *Palaz* is the modern Turkish spelling for palace. In fact, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who ordered a shift in the Turkish language from Arabic to Latin script after the fall of the Ottoman empire to link up with the modern world, came to power in 1923, the same year as the publication of Stevens’ *Harmonium*. Yet Stevens’ exoticizing impulse is precisely the opposite of Atatürk’s modernizing one. In and through *palaz*, Stevens seems to invoke the Ottoman splendor of the fez, divan, and samovar, even to the extent of associating Hoon’s *palaz* with certain ceremonies of Greek orthodox religion, in which ointment is sprinkled on beards (at this time parts of present-day Greece were still under Ottoman control). This near-East is the imagined setting in which to experience such self-discovery; but, as with notions of Western self-enlightenment and self-fulfillment associated with the East later in the same century, the East is itself at that very moment ceasing to be, or striving to cease to be, “strange.”

### III

These observations may at first seem too weighty for two examples of tea in Stevens’s early work, emblemized by umbrellas and a *palaz*, to bear. Yet despite its relatively rare appearance in Stevens’ oeuvre, tea must be understood not merely as an occasional preoccupation for the poet. Rather, as a drink, a source of pleasure, a commodity, and an idea, it was of crucial importance, first in Stevens’ days as a Harvard student and later as a Hartford lawyer and an established poet, as we shall see. As A. Walton Litz and other Stevens critics have noted, there was, during Stevens’ formative years as a poet, a fascination among American intellectuals for a certain idea of the “Orient,” one which offered not only sensuality (as it did for an earlier generation interested in *japonaiserie* and *chinoiserie*), but also a delicacy in the arrangement of things, a simplicity and restraint that countered late-Victorian excess. This sense of delicacy was perhaps first translated into Western idioms in the influential post-impressionist paintings of James McNeil Whistler. As Pound observed in an early issue of *The Egoist*, “From Whistler and the Japanese, or Chinese, the ‘world,’ that is to say, the fragment of the English-speaking world that spreads itself into print, learned to enjoy ‘arrangements’ of colours and masses” (306).

Pound here seems to be endorsing “Oriental” “arrangements” and the art of “the Japanese, or Chinese,” although his use of quotation marks—a Poundian tic—might indicate a certain aversion: it is the “world” in quotation marks that “spreads itself into print,” giving a sense of the kind of prettification and accompanying imperialist *raum*-making sensibility that Pound ostensibly abhorred. On the question of the effacement of differences between “Japanese, or Chinese,” it is worth remembering that Pound himself drew on Japanese translations of Chinese poetry throughout the

1910s for his own re-translations (including the “Epitaphs” and “The River Merchant’s Wife: A Letter”). Comparatively modern Japanese culture was, at the turn of the twentieth century, seen as a custodian of ancient Chinese traditions—including tea drinking. China had been rendered economically abject by colonization, but the tendency of European writers to see the two as a unified civilization perfectly mirrored Japanese imperialist aspirations.

Yet, the appearance of tea in Pound’s and Eliot’s poetry is typically associated with pretension. In “E. P. ode pour l’élection de son sepulchre,” in “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley,” for example, the speaker notes, “The tea-rose tea-gown, etc. / Supplants the mousseline of Cos, / The pianola ‘replaces’ / Sappho’s barbitos” (*Personae* 189); the “etc.” and the quotation marks around “replaces” give a strong sense of Pound’s opinion of Edwardian-era Japano-/Sinophiles. (Tea-gowns, described by Jane Pettigrew as “expensive items, made from luxurious fabrics and trimmings,” were often made in Europe in kimono style [158].) Eliot’s Prufrock, meanwhile, asks, “Should I, after tea and cakes and ices, / Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?” (5–6). The answer, as the robotic Eliotic rhyme indicates, is “no”: the world of “tea and cakes and ices” is a phony world, and it engenders moral and physical weakness.

From Pound’s and Eliot’s “worlds” of tea we turn back to Stevens’. Around the time Stevens was finishing his studies at Harvard, Okakura Kakuzo, then a well-known promoter of traditional Japanese culture, took a position as curator at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and it is likely that Stevens would have known about Okakura’s influential public lectures at Isabella Stewart Gardner’s brand-new Fenway mansion. In any case, Stevens was almost certainly familiar with Okakura’s popular book on the tea ceremony, which was written in English at a pivotal moment in Japan’s historical engagement with the West.<sup>8</sup> In the middle of the nineteenth century, Japan, which had been closed to all foreign trade for 250 years, was forced open by Commodore Perry’s “black ships” and, over the next four decades, found itself confronted with what some perceived as an inundation of European cultural products and attitudes. As if to ward off this unbridled encroachment, the thoroughly bilingual Okakura, who was acquainted with Ernest Fenollosa (a late-nineteenth-century American expert in Chinese and Japanese art) in Tokyo, sought to interest early-twentieth-century Western aesthetes and intellectuals in “traditional” Japanese culture, hoping in part that the excitement for Eastern tradition in the West might filter back to Japan itself.<sup>9</sup>

*The Book of Tea* is a fascinatingly pedagogical explanation of the Japanese mode of life to a presumably uncomprehending American audience. In the first essay, “The Cup of Humanity,” Okakura notes:

The Philosophy of Tea is not mere aestheticism in the ordinary acceptance of the term, for it expresses conjointly with



ethics and religion our [the Japanese] whole point of view about man and nature. It is hygiene, for it enforces cleanliness; it is economics, for it shows comfort in simplicity rather than in the complex and costly; it is moral geometry, inasmuch as it defines our sense of proportion to the universe. It represents the true spirit of Eastern democracy by making all its votaries aristocrats in taste. (18)

Writing of what he called “Teaism,” which is “taoism in disguise,” Okakura suggests, “Teaism is the art of concealing beauty that you may discover it, of suggesting what you dare not reveal. It is the noble secret of laughing at yourself, calmly yet thoroughly, and is thus humour itself—the smile of philosophy” (25). Later in the essay, in a section on “Tea-Masters,” Okakura—who was also known, out of respect, as Tenshin (*ten* meaning “heaven” and *shin*, “heart,” in Chinese [i.e., not Japanese])—notes,

Many of our delicate dishes, as well as our way of serving food, are their [the tea-masters’] inventions. They have taught us to dress only in garments of sober colours. They have instructed us in the proper spirit in which to approach flowers. They have given emphasis to our natural love of simplicity, and shown us the beauty of humility. (97–98)

Doubtless many of Okakura’s observations would have struck a chord with Stevens, whose East-coast-Protestant sensibility might have found much to admire in this philosophy of hygiene, simplicity, humility, democracy, and quiet humor. Perhaps most directly pertinent is the idea of “the art of concealing beauty that you may discover it,” which could be seen as being in accordance with Stevens’ own smilingly philosophical way of engaging with things—at least in his poetry. In any case, Stevens would certainly have agreed with Okakura’s claim that “Nowadays industrialism is making true refinement more and more difficult all the world over” (69), and supported the thrust of his question, “Do we not need the tea-room more than ever?” (69).

Lest Okakura be dismissed as a “mere” aesthete—and it is remarkable how often the qualifier “mere” precedes aesthete, as though to protect what the noun advertises—it should be noted that Okakura places Japanophilia in a broader cultural and political context as well, noting, in comments that anticipate certain tenets of earlier postcolonial criticism,

The average Westerner, in his sleek complacency, will see in the tea ceremony but another instance of the thousand and one oddities which constitute the quaintness and childishness of the East to him. He was wont to regard Japan as barbarous while she indulged in the gentle arts of peace: he calls her civilised

since she began to commit wholesale slaughter on Manchurian battlefields. (19–20)

“When will the West,” he asks, plaintively, “understand, or try to understand, the East?” (20). Explaining the art of tea is one way, Okakura suggests, of fostering that bipolar understanding.

#### IV

It is curious in this regard that Stevens directly positions his only quasi-narrative engagement with tea in direct relation to then-contemporary racial politics of the United States. In his 1916 verse play *Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise*, three Chinese men sit in a forest of heavy trees on a hill-top in Eastern Pennsylvania (the area where Stevens was born and raised) and drink tea and tell enigmatic stories, as two silent Negroes anxiously serve them. Hanging from the creaking limb of a tree is an initially indistinguishable human body.

The play’s dialogue verges on the stereotypically “Oriental,” and the Chinese, save for their western clothes, are almost indistinguishable from Okakura’s “Teaist” Japanese, or, for that matter, some of Stevens’ own later pronouncements about aesthetics<sup>10</sup>:

THIRD CHINESE [*shrugging his shoulders*]

Let the candle shine for beauty of shining.

I . . . long for the windless pavilions.

And yet it may be true

That nothing is beautiful

Except with reference to ourselves,

Nor ugly,

Nor high,

[*pointing to the sky*]

Nor low.

[*pointing to the candle*]

No: not even sunrise. (OP 154)

The Third Chinese then encourages the First Chinese to sing, and the stage directions read as follows:

[*He (the Third Chinese) takes an instrument from one of the baskets and hands it to the First Chinese, who sings . . . (a) song, accompanying himself, somewhat tunelessly, on the instrument. The Third Chinese takes various things out of the basket for tea. He arranges fruit. The First Chinese watches him while he plays. The Second Chinese gazes at the ground. The sky shows the first signs of morning.*] (OP 154)

Much as tea ceremony and flower arrangement are linked in Okakura, here tea preparation accompanies fruit arrangement and, moreover, both are associated with the power of song—albeit a “somewhat tuneless” song. Eventually, the story told by one of the Chinese men miraculously brings Anna, the girl about whom he is speaking, to life, and she in turn tells the story of the man who committed suicide for love of her: this is the body hanging in the tree. The play ends with the Second Negro picking up the Chinese instrument and attempting to play it. But he hears a crack of a whip and moves to the side of the road.

Although tea and tea preparation are not themselves apparently central to the play’s “action,” inasmuch as there is action, they are in fact at the very “geographical” nexus of *Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise*, serving an important role both in generating the domesticated “Oriental” mode of the play and in linking gesture to music, ritual to modernity, and art to politics, specifically, in this case, American contemporary politics. Despite the now seemingly offensive depictions of Asians and African Americans, Stevens, the man who would later be taken to task for his offhand use of the words “nigger” and “coon,” seems in *Three Travelers* to confront the question of racism with remarkable sensitivity. The implications of the Negro’s ultimate gesture, which takes place at dawn, are subtle but clear: like the Chinese tea-drinkers, the Negro wants to bring the dead—specifically, the hanged man—to life with song. The cracking whip, sounding the return of a persistent, injurious oppression of work, intrudes, arresting the nascent music and cutting off the momentary potential for escape, liberation, or transcendence that song might bring. (Without traversing ethical categories, might we not think of Stevens’ own nearly decade-long abandonment of poetry for the business world in an analogous way?)

## V

Some nineteen years after the sole performance of *Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise*, which Stevens incidentally did not see, and twelve years after the publication of *Harmonium*, Stevens began sending and receiving letters concerning tea, first to and from the Associated Tea Syndicate in Darjeeling, India, and later, to and from the Ceylon Tea Plantations Company in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka).<sup>11</sup> The tone of the letters concerning the purchase of tea is truly strange: Stevens often assumes a straightforward business idiom, disavowing all knowledge of tea, and implying that the transaction is simply a question of getting what you are willing to pay for. Stevens’ letters are usually written on the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company’s letterhead; he never reveals his avocation as a poet, and a reader of the letters would hardly imagine that this was a person capable of writing “Tea” or “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon.”

In her biography, Joan Richardson notes that in the mid-1930s, the poet’s wife Elsie began to discourage Stevens from drinking alcohol at home and that, in consequence, Stevens took up tea drinking. “As he gave up alco-

hol," Richardson notes, Stevens "became a true connoisseur of teas" (*Later Years* 126). Perhaps in his correspondence Stevens is merely being modest about his knowledge of tea, or perhaps his voice is evidence of the masculine, American "get down to business" mode that Lentricchia, in *Ariel and the Police*, understands as a kind of crisis of masculinity in late capitalism. In either case—whether a question of modesty or masculinity—the letters call into question the notion of Stevens' connoisseurship of tea. More important, they suggest that the question of connoisseurship in Stevens, and, indeed, in literary modernism more generally, may be ripe for reexamination.<sup>12</sup>

The first mention of tea purchase in the Stevens collection at the Huntington Library occurs in 1935. Presumably in response to an inquiry letter from Stevens, H. H. Bartes, of the Darjeeling-based Associated Tea Syndicate, writes a brief note dated March 5, 1935, giving the prices for "A1 Golden Pekoe, Flowery Orange Pekoe and EXTRA SUPERFINE quality tea."<sup>13</sup> In response, Stevens writes, in a letter of March 30, 1935, "I dislike to trouble you by asking questions, but . . . I know very little about tea" (WAS 1174). He goes on to note, "[W]hen I was trying to buy a China tea in San Francisco, I was told that the best could be procured for \$30 a pound. . . . The man in San Francisco seems to have been pulling my leg. But, then, I know nothing about it, and am trying to find out" (WAS 1174). It is noteworthy that Stevens, in a short letter, should twice avow his ignorance: "I know very little," he claims; "I know nothing about it." It is hard to determine whether that ignorance is genuine or feigned; the reference to "pulling my leg" indicates that Stevens wanted to strike a "virile," unpretentious tone. What seems clear is that Stevens wished to buy a very good tea, perhaps in order to impress his colleagues at the Hartford: \$30 in the 1930s, during the heart of the Depression, was a very large sum of money for a pound of tea—roughly equivalent to \$400 in 2002. In any case, the story of the obscure "man in San Francisco" would provoke a letter of response from an employee at the Associated Tea Syndicate (whose signature is illegible), offering Stevens the "CHOICEST FLOWERY ORANGE PEKOE," and asserting that this was the "best tea that could possibly be expected from these hills" (WAS 1171). The tea man goes on to note, "We have never heard of any tea produced anywhere in this world which could be sold at 30 dollars a lb. The man in San Francisco was certainly pulling your leg" (WAS 1171).

Whether or not the "30 dollars a lb." tea was a tall tale, Stevens pressed his point. Perhaps sensing that he was not making himself clear enough, Stevens wrote, in a letter of October 8, 1937:

I am looking for the very best tea I can get. Most teas here are flat and pretty worthless, whereas the last tea that you sent me had a natural fragrance and quality that I very greatly appreciated. I leave the choice to you, not asking you to send any defi-

nite quantity. All I want is as much of your very choicest tea as the enclosed remittance of 100 rupees . . . makes possible. (WAS 1176)

During this same period, as is well known by Stevens scholars, Stevens began his extraordinary epistolary correspondence with Ceylon-based Leonard Van Geyzel. Perhaps less frequently observed is the fact that, in the very first letter, dated September 14, 1937, Stevens asks Van Geyzel not only about the purchase of Christmas gifts for his wife and daughter, but, explicitly, about tea.

There are three in my family: Mrs. Stevens, myself and our daughter, who is 14. Probably Mrs. Stevens would like, as well as anything procurable in Ceylon, a necklace. . . . As for myself, I should like to have some tea, say, five pounds of the very best tea procurable. This need not all be of the same sort. I am thinking of straight teas: the sort of thing that I could order directly later on. Perhaps you could mark on the packages the price and the name of the dealer. I should like a tea that would be something not procurable, say, anywhere else, at least not procurable in the general market. The tea, which is non-dutiable, should be sent separately from the other things. (*L* 324)<sup>14</sup>

Again, the letter is revealing, in this case because of what it tells us about the way Stevens favored tea (i.e., “the very best,” “straight”), about his knowledge of tax codes, and about his habitual use of the word “procurable”; particularly interesting is the delicate “say” that interrupts the “not procurable” and “anywhere else.” In any case, Van Geyzel’s selection of items impressed Stevens with their acuity. On December 31, 1937, Stevens expressed his gratitude, claiming that Van Geyzel’s choices, which included a Buddha and several necklaces, were “most truly representative of Ceylon” (*L* 327)—although it is worth remembering that a large proportion of the population of Ceylon was by then not Buddhist at all but Tamil, Southern Indian workers brought to the British-controlled island expressly to pick tea.<sup>15</sup>

Using his new acquaintance Van Geyzel as an introduction, Stevens sent a letter, on January 10, 1938, to the Superintendent of the Scrubs Estate in Nuwara Eliya, Ceylon, in which he enclosed a draft for 50 rupees and asked for some of the Estate’s “Broken Orange Pekoe.” “I thought that possibly, in addition to Broken Orange Pekoe,” Stevens noted, “you might be willing to take the trouble to select for me several other sorts, all of the very finest quality: it is not the quantity of the tea that I want, but the quality of it, because I am interested to know something about tea” (WAS 1348). He adds, “If you could have some one pick up a dozen or so picture postcards of Nuwara Eliya . . . I shall be grateful” (WAS 1348).

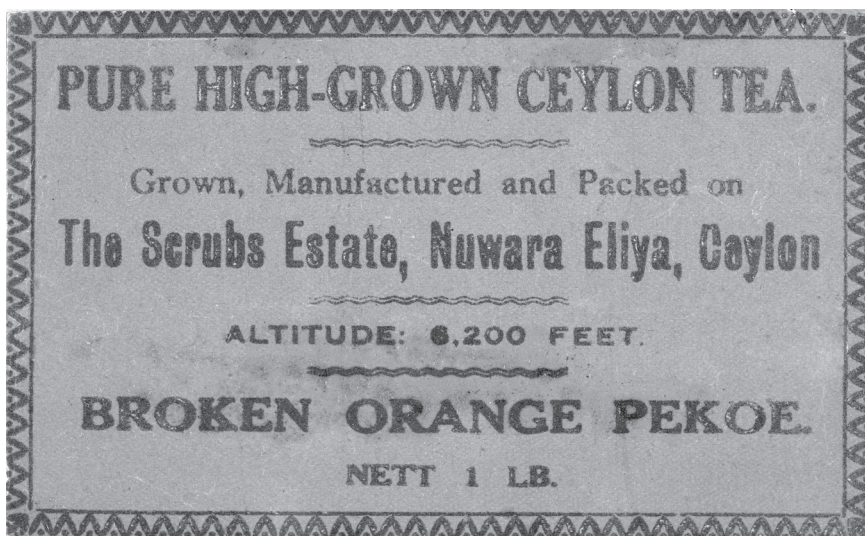


Fig. 1. Tea Label from Ceylon. Permission of the Huntington Library.

N. S. Picken, the proprietor of the Scrubs Estate, apparently complied with Stevens' "interest to know something," as Stevens' response to Picken, dated June 28, 1938, indicates:

Let me take this opportunity to thank you for sending the postcards. The tea is very good, but I think it is a little improved by the fact that I know just where it came from.

What I had in mind when I wrote to you originally was the idea of picking up some very exceptional tea, as, for example, a tea of a special picking or a tea from an exceptionally favored spot, or whatever it is that distinguishes one tea from another. . . . Very likely the only practical test is the price. I should say that the tea that you have sent me is as good as any tea I have ever had; nevertheless there is a man in Darjeeling from whom I buy tea occasionally,<sup>16</sup> who charges me about 10 rupees a pound for it. Perhaps I am persuaded by the price that that particular tea has an unmatched fragrance; it is a straight tea without anything added. (WAS 1349)

Besides clarifying what Stevens was looking for in tea (something "exceptional" from "an exceptionally favored spot," quality over quantity, straightness over additive-requiring), and revealing Stevens-the-businessman's questionable sense of axiology (high price = high value), possibly in this case intended lightheartedly, what is particularly salient about this letter is that it definitively links Stevens' tea-purchasing phase with both his oriental-trinket-purchasing phase and his postcard-collect-



ing phase, all of which seem concerned with an embodiment of the foreign in the domestic and with a particular notion of distance. Tea, for Stevens, is “somehow improved” by being associated with an exotic place designated in a photograph.

Alan Filreis has aptly described Stevens’ “postcard imagination,” noting the fascination the poet/insurance company attorney had for imagining longed-for lands while remaining uncomfortably comfortable “at home” in Hartford. It is well known that Stevens traveled outside the country rarely, going once to Canada, taking a cruise through the Panama canal, and visiting Cuba twice. Despite being in his adult years a man of means, he never managed to travel to Europe, much less to Asia. Filreis demonstrates how Stevens’ poetry interacts with, and replicates, American foreign policy during the emergent Cold War, especially with regard to Europe. As Filreis notes, “between 1948 and 1952 Stevens took special pleasure in the letters he received from a largely unreconstructed Europe” (211). Yet perusal of the Huntington’s tea letters indicates that Stevens’ preoccupation with the materiality of letters, and especially postcards, began earlier and was not associated merely with Europe but with a broader “world.” Indeed, Stevens regularly asked Van Geysel in the late 1930s how long it took for his letters and postcards to arrive in Ceylon and noted the amount of temporal distance between the dates on Van Geysel’s letters and his receipt of them.<sup>17</sup> Something about the speed of postal service, which began to be interrupted during the war, reminded Stevens about the distance between “here” and “there,” a distance that, in his poetry, as in a cup of tea, could be rapidly, and pleasantly, bridged.<sup>18</sup>

## VI

It is difficult to assess how much the Ceylon postcards themselves fueled Stevens’ poetic sensibilities. What is doubtless is that Ceylon, a place explicitly associated with tea cultivation, had, during the very same period, “taken a strong hold on [his] imagination” (*L* 337), as Stevens writes to Van Geysel on April 12, 1939.<sup>19</sup> In “Connoisseur of Chaos,” originally published in 1939, for example—a poem whose title itself expresses a relation between the collector’s sense of control and a radical fear of disorder not unconnected with the disorderly resonance of that year—Stevens offers the following conditional proposition:

If all the green of spring was blue, and it is;  
If all the flowers of South Africa were bright  
On the tables of Connecticut, and they are;  
If Englishmen lived without tea in Ceylon, and they do;  
And if it all went on in an orderly way,  
And it does; a law of inherent opposites,  
Of essential unity, is as pleasant as port,

As pleasant as the brush-strokes of a bough,  
An upper, particular bough in, say, Marchand. (CP 215)

The passage demonstrates how, for Stevens, a “law of inherent opposites”—an “orderly” law—allows green to be blue, exotic “flowers of South Africa” to be “bright on the tables of Connecticut,” and “Englishmen” to live “without tea in Ceylon.” An Englishman living without tea in Ceylon, not partaking in the pleasure that is at hand, is as inherently “opposite” as partaking fully, through tea drinking, in the pleasure of that which is not at hand (being in Ceylon), while sitting at one’s table in Connecticut.

Yet this “law of opposites,” in this playfully pedantic poem, is apposite to an “essential unity.” The pairing—the poem seems implicitly to refer to the inherent oppositions of wartime as well—expresses why introspective traveling across space in the mind, and enjoying the products of that travel, can be “as pleasant as port,” port implying both the beverage and a “portal,” which, for Stevens, is a word associated with the imagination itself, the voyeuristic vessel par excellence.<sup>20</sup> Tea from Ceylon, like a pleasant port or a postcard, or, again, like poetry, allows one to be there in a particular way, whereas getting there, for Stevens, may be overrated, disordered, and, indeed, precisely unpleasant.

Jean Hippolyte Marchand, 1883–1941, was a painter, lithographer, and illustrator who illustrated books by, among others, Valéry and Claudel. According to Glen MacLeod, Stevens owned a painting by Marchand, so the “say” in the excerpt’s last line is neither incidental nor generic, as it might initially seem.<sup>21</sup> Stevens himself once wrote of “the difference between the man who can talk about pictures and the man who can afford to buy them” (MacLeod 30–31), in apparent praise of the latter. In fact, in his later life Stevens made sure he became the kind of man who could afford to buy (from the right “*marchands*”) such works as, say, a Marchand. But here we see some of the chaotic ambivalence of the connoisseur: Stevens wants, through flowers from South Africa or tea from Ceylon, to engage the world from a distance, to find an enclave, what Okakura called a “tea room” at once in the world and protected from it. Yet that room, even for the “pensive man,” can exist only ephemerally; it is as ephemeral as a sip of tea, a feeling from a poem, or “things chalked / On the sidewalk” (CP 216). (In fact the very slowness of letters to Van Geyzel during the early 1940s would confirm this ephemerality: Ceylon, which Stevens imagined to be a Buddhist oasis, became embroiled in the war, and, after the war, would become part of a “third world” that complicated the binaristic notion of a “law of inherent opposites” undergirded by an “essential unity.”)

## VII

“The Man on the Dump,” published in *Parts of a World* in 1942, demonstrates the relation between the collector’s ethos of Stevens and his shifting sense of place, and it extends and complicates our ability to imagine



the world of tea as an essential unity made up of a law of inherent opposites. The poem begins with an interstitial moment between two types of creeping (“Day creeps down. The moon is creeping up”), and takes us from a local town dump to Esthonia via the figure of tea. The poem offers its first images of the dump in this way:

So the sun,  
And so the moon, both come, and the janitor’s poems  
Of every day, the wrapper on the can of pears,  
The cat in the paper-bag, the corset, the box  
From Esthonia: the tiger chest, for tea. (CP 201)

Rather than providing a rationalized order that would sort out the dump, this stanza, which aligns earth with sky, conjures up a sensorium through which images pass: Are the janitor’s poems actual poems he has written that end up on the dump, or merely the quotidian “poetry” described in the paratactic list of items that follows? What, if any, is the connection between “can,” “cat,” and “corset” (the last of which hard “c” words resonates with “The Fire Sermon” from another “dump” poem, Eliot’s “The Waste Land”), and “the box / From Esthonia”? Is the box from Esthonia, as the colon after “Esthonia” implies, the tiger chest itself, a bit of striped wood furniture, or is it another item in the dump? Does “for tea” mean that the box/chest contains tea leaves, or is it a Britishism for what Americans call dinner—the box from Esthonia/tiger chest then having once been a kind of table for eating? (This definition of “tea,” in which tea implies a meal instead of the hot beverage, could also apply to “Tea,” “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon,” *Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise*, and even “Connoisseur of Chaos.”<sup>22</sup> Tea, as I am construing it, is potentially leaf, drink, meal, or ceremony; it is significant precisely because it can be any and all of these.)

Of special interest in the present context is the relay system Stevens sets up between “Esthonia” and “tea.” Like “Java” in “Tea,” or “Tennessee” in “Anecdote of the Jar,” or Yucatan or Peking in other Stevens poems, the word “Esthonia” may have been chosen for the musical qualities contained in its pronunciation, and, perhaps, for the verbally echoing “e” and “t” sounds one also finds in “tea.” On the other hand, given that the poem was published during the height of the Second World War, it seems improbable that Esthonia, one of the Baltic States that in 1940 was absorbed into the Soviet Union, and then, in 1942, occupied by National Socialist-led Germany, should have merely arbitrary significance. “Esthonia” is at once an exotic, rarely visited elsewhere (its exoticism emphasized by its connection with the “tiger” in “tiger chest”<sup>23</sup>) and a geopolitically interstitial place—between East and West, Europe and Asia, USSR and Germany—that accords with the temporal and experiential betweennesses suggested by day creeping down and moon creeping up—Stevens’ reversal of Shelley’s *Triumph of Life* daybreak scenario, in which Shelley’s ro-

matic sublime is supplanted by the sublimity of the quotidian, down in the dump.

The emergence of the word “tea” leads to an important stanza break and a shift in tone and perspective: from the dump and its compendium of redundant things to the observation, “The freshness of night has been fresh a long time. / The freshness of morning, the blowing of the day” (CP 202). Amid the fetid squalor of the dump, there is “freshness”; and, as with the coldness of the “The Snow Man,” this freshness has been fresh “a long time.” The aesthetic shift generated by tea leads to a compendium of flowers (“azaleas and so on”), the sounds of music (“the bubbling of basoons”), and an exploration of the metaphysical questions proposed by the dump (“Could it after all / Be merely oneself . . . ?”; “Is it a philosopher’s honeymoon . . . ?”). The poem famously ends with a question and an answer, of sorts: “Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the” (CP 202–03). If we follow the progression that the poem proposes, then, departing from “tea,” we arrive at “the”: it is as though tea is a pivot point between “it” and “the,” West and East, culture and nature, the ephemeral and “the truth.”

Is this truth the genuine definite article? Let us bear in mind that Stevens once wrote that French and English constitute a single language. If this is the case, then it seems no accident that the final word of the poem, “the,” given an accent agree over its “e,” would render the French word for tea, *thé*. If it is indeed no accident, notice that the early “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon” and the late “Man on the Dump” both link tea with truth—a strange form of concealed beauty contained in the thing (in this case word) itself. But whereas the “truth” of “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon” held out the possibility of a world of one’s own making, the “truth” of “The Man on the Dump” circles back, interrogatively, on its own redundancy.

## VIII

In 1952, the year after Stevens won his first National Book Award for *The Auroras of Autumn*, Lipton introduced its “Flo-Thru” paper tea bag, thereby paving the way for the beverage to become a truly popular international phenomenon. By this time, Stevens seems to have given up tea; there are no further records of its purchase in the Huntington’s Stevens collection, nor, to my knowledge, is it mentioned in a Stevens poem or essay. (Certainly we know that Elsie Stevens’ desire for tea to diminish her husband’s alcohol consumption was ultimately ineffective.) Although one hesitates to claim that this is the case because the world Stevens associated with tea—a world that was first seen as an exotic elsewhere accessible through thinking and feeling, later to be “brought closer” through the kind of connoisseurship associated with poetry—no longer existed, it is evident that the world had, from 1906 to 1952, changed shape dramatically, as had the poetry that responded to its “parts.”<sup>24</sup> We could express this shape-shifting in abbreviated form by reiterating the place names Stevens explicitly

or implicitly associates with tea: China, Japan, Java, Turkey, Ceylon, and Esthonia; we have already explored what each place, undergoing dramatic historical transformation, might (or might not) have meant for Stevens. We have also seen that around the apparently still center of “tea” swirl a number of “ty”-suffixed attributes that teach us a great deal about Stevens’ poetics, including alterity, masculinity, indemnity, quality, and even a certain kind of “verity.” There is, for Stevens, a truth in tea, a truth analogous to poetry’s truth, which, for Stevens, as for Okakura, involves maintaining a delicate balance between discovery and concealment. Stevens takes his tea straight, without anything added, but his poetry takes to truth sinuously, and the truth it finds is often unexpected and refreshing.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Research for this essay was supported by a PSC-CUNY Research Award and by a research fellowship from the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. I am grateful to the staff at the Huntington for their assistance and for their permission to reproduce material from the library’s Wallace Stevens collection. I am also grateful for having met the Stevens scholar David Haglund while at the Huntington; he has provided invaluable help during the revision of this article for publication, and many of the insights herein are originally his. Thanks also are due to Richard Kaye, Radhika Jones, John N. Serio, and anonymous readers for the *Wallace Stevens Journal* for their attentive readings of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Harold Bloom, in *Poems of Our Climate*, claims that Stevens wrote a sensual, Lucretian “poetry of earth” in his early years that gave way to a more ethereal philosophical mode in the later poems; Helen Vendler, in *On Extended Wings*, also associates the earlier poetry with earthly exoticism (which she nevertheless claims Stevens did not actually feel) and the later with philosophical discursivity. Both Bloom and Vendler prefer the latter poetry.

<sup>3</sup> Holly Stevens sought, in *Palm at the End of the Mind*, to arrange the poems chronologically and placed “Tea” third, after “Blanch McCarthy” and “Cy Est Pourtraicte, Madame Ste Ursule, et Les Unze Mille Vierges,” but the latter and “Tea” were, according to Robert Buttel in *The Making of Harmonium*, published together in *Rogue* in March 1915.

<sup>4</sup> Van Vechten claimed that he liked the line but suggested a “prurient variant” (43).

<sup>5</sup> For a broader treatment of the history of the tea trade, see Forrest, *Tea for the British*.

<sup>6</sup> Although “Java” here clearly relates to tea, it is noteworthy that in American slang the word became an expression for coffee. (The *OED* notes that *Java* signified “any kind of coffee” as early as 1850.)

<sup>7</sup> Eleanor Cook, in *Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War*, points out that “elephant’s ear” is another name for caladium, “a tender plant, not native to northern temperate zones, grown for its leaves, like tea” (112).

<sup>8</sup> In the introduction to the first volume of her biography of Stevens, Joan Richardson notes that in a 1909 letter to his soon-to-be-wife Elsie, Stevens quotes an observation of Charles Lamb’s found in (but not attributed to) Okakura’s *The Book of Tea*, but Richardson does not elaborate (*Early Years* 29). In fact, in this letter, dated May 9, 1909, Stevens writes of “epigrams, like, ‘The greatest pleasure is to do a good action by

stealth, and have it found out by accident,' " asking, parenthetically, "could any true thing be more amusing?" (L 143). In Okakura's version in *The Book of Tea*, Lamb is called "a professed devotee" of tea drinking, and the quotation reads that Lamb "wrote that the greatest pleasure he knew was to do a good action by stealth, and to have it found out by accident" (25); Stevens, possibly reproducing Okakura's version, leaves out the "he knew" as well as the "I knew" that appeared in the actual quotation, which originally appeared in the essay "Table Talk by the Late Elia" in *The Athenaeum* in 1834.

Lest this evidence seem scant, Stevens' letter to Elsie reproduces his own notebook entries, which appear in Holly Stevens' *Souvenirs and Prophecies* among other such observations, written on the same day or within five days of the writing of the letter, as "Scraps of paper covered with scribbling—Chinese antiquities, names of colors, in lists like rainbows, jottings of things to think about" (218); "lists of Japanese eras in history" (219); "Landscape-Gardening—another art of Chinese origin aimed at a definite influence on the beholder's mind"; "Art of flower-arrangement" (221); "Ukiyoyé is the Japanese equivalent of genre" (221); "Arab chivalry, Persian poetry, Chinese ethics, Indian thought" (221), and "Sakyamuni—all evil resides in the individual will to live" (221). Each of these demonstrates that Stevens was reading Oriental and/or Orientalist texts in or around May 1909. In fact, in *The Book of Tea*, Okakura devotes a whole chapter to flower arranging and writes of the impulses in flower arrangement that "formed the Ukiyoe and Shijo schools of painting" (91). In the same notebook entry, Stevens claims that "Kakuzo Okakura is a cultivated, but not an original thinker. His 'Ideals of the East' [a book on "Oriental" notions of war] was interesting" (221).

Admittedly this does not demonstrate a clear, acknowledged influence of Okakura's *Book of Tea* on Stevens, but it does show that Stevens was reading Okakura around the time he cited Lamb, and the non-sequitur between Okakura's not being an "original thinker" and the notion of Okakura's previous book being "interesting" might suggest that Stevens was at that moment reading *The Book of Tea*. Although Richardson incorrectly reproduces the Lamb quote (rendering it "The best thing by far is to do good by stealth and have it discovered by chance"), I agree with her claim that Stevens took Okakura's writings on tea "deeply to heart" (*Later Years* 324), although this process may have been more unconscious than she acknowledges.

Okakura's *The Book of Tea* was originally published in 1906 in New York by Dodd, Mead & Co. In 2000, the book was released in "The Illustrated Classic Version," a tastefully designed hardcover edition meant to appeal to would-be tea connoisseurs, by Tuttle Publishing in Boston. References are to the Tuttle edition, including the quotation from Lamb.

<sup>9</sup> For a brief overview of Okakura's fascinating career, which included a stint in India and a close friendship with Tagore as well as a suspected romance with Isabella Stewart Gardner, see Christopher Benfey, "Tea with Okakura." Drawing on Richardson's biography, Benfey suggests that Stevens was "an enthusiastic reader" of Okakura's books (47, n 8). Benfey also points suggestively to Okakura's possible influence on Martin Heidegger (citing Graham Parkes's "Rising Sun over Black Forest: Heidegger's Japanese Connections," appended to Reinhard May's *Heidegger's Hidden Sources: East Asian Influence on His Work* (96, 114 n 125). I perceive a connection between Okakura's notion of concealed beauty and Heidegger's version of *aletheia* (truth) and allude to this at the end of this article when I return to Stevens' claims about tea and "truth."

<sup>10</sup> On Stevens' apparent conflation of Chinese and Japanese, it is worth noting a story told of Okakura in Boston. When an American approached Okakura and a group of friends in Boston asking, "Which kind of *-nese* are you? Chinese, or Japanese, or Javanese?" Okakura supposedly replied, "We are Japanese gentlemen. But what kind of *-key* are you? Are you a Yankee, or a donkey or a monkey?" (cited in Elise Grilli's biographical sketch of Okakura in *The Book of Tea*, 108).

<sup>11</sup> The received letters and carbon copies of some of Stevens' own letters are contained in the Stevens collection at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, and are quoted with permission.

<sup>12</sup> Susan Stewart's brilliant study of collecting in "On Longing" would be one place to start this investigation. Undoubtedly, connoisseurship reveals an aspect of commodity fetishism, and Lentricchia is right to focus on how the poet's "mammoth appetite" for tasteful things in the later poems reveals aspects of fetishism. But I do not think the question of connoisseurship posed by tea in Stevens is exhausted by ideology critique, as I seek to demonstrate in the following.

<sup>13</sup> This item is reproduced by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California. It is catalogued as WAS 1970. Further references to items from the Huntington collection will appear in the body of the text.

<sup>14</sup> That tea purchase was central to this initial contact with Van Geysel is made clear toward the end of the letter: "You are to feel entirely free to send whatever you like, except that I should like to be sure of the tea" (L 324).

<sup>15</sup> In this letter, Stevens refers to Ashley Gibson's *Cinnamon and Frangipani*, a text published in 1923 about the "authentic" Ceylon that was, even then, beginning to produce touristy knickknacks. Stevens' tone here reflects that of an earlier letter in which he writes, to his wife, concerning a visit to the New York Botanical Garden in July, 1915, "I was able to impress on myself that larkspur comes from China. Was there anything more Chinese when you stop to think of it? And coleus comes from Java. Good Heavens, how that helps one to understand coleus—or Java" (L 184). David Haglund reminds me that this letter was written just a few months after the poem "Tea" (discussed above) appeared, and that larkspur and China appear in "Six Significant Landscapes," first published in March 1916.

<sup>16</sup> This "man in Darjeeling" must be H. H. Bartes, of the Associated Tea Syndicate.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Stevens' June 6, 1938, letter to Van Geysel, in which Stevens comments on the remarkable speed of Van Geysel's previous correspondence's arrival: "Your letter of May 16<sup>th</sup> made remarkable time. It was on my desk [*sic*] in Hartford on June 1" (WAS 2470; part of the letter is republished in L 322–23). On September 13, 1938, he writes, via "Air Mail By Clipper Plane from San Francisco" to Van Geysel, that he "shall be interested to know (by postcard, say) the date of [this letter's] receipt by you" (WAS 2475). On January 18, 1940, he notes, "The album and the calendar which appear to have left Colombo late in November, reached me on January 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup>" (WAS 2478).

<sup>18</sup> More work needs to be done to articulate how these questions of postcard imagination link global politics to an anxiety over masculinity. The ethos of the collector—the man who amasses Buddhas, postcards, and other knickknacks—seems rather at odds with the idea of the virile maker and man of action that Stevens elsewhere propounded. As an anonymous reader of this essay for the *Wallace Stevens Journal* notes, "Let's not forget the entry of 'tea dance' and 'tea room' into the vocabulary of contemporary *gay* male life." (This is to say nothing of the sexual act called "tea bagging.") It is also worth recalling that "tea" is also a slang term for marijuana, although it seems unlikely that Stevens would ever have used the term in that sense; Van Vechten, entranced with African-American idioms, might have. Apropos of the topic of racial identity, discussed earlier in the essay, any exploration of Stevens' tea purchase would be incomplete if it neglected to note Stevens' letter of December 17, 1935, to James A. Powers, concerning an attempt Stevens had made to obtain teas from Benjamin Kwok, a student at Lingnan University in Canton, China.

I sent Mr. Qwock [*sic*] some money last spring, with a request for some erudite teas. It appears that, when this letter reached Canton, he had left on a holiday in Central China, or in the moon, or wherever it is that Chi-

nese go to in the summer time. But on his return to his studies in the autumn he wrote to me and said that he had written to one of his uncles, who lives in Wang-Pang-Woo-Poo-Woof-Woof-Woof, and has been in the tea business for hundreds of generations. I have no doubt that in due course I shall receive from Mr. Qwock enough tea to wreck my last kidney, and with it some very peculiar other things, because I had asked him to send me the sort of things that the learned Chinese drink with that sort of tea. (L 301)

Despite the rather obnoxious caricature, which, like most "tendentious" racial jokes, can be read as expressing an anxiety over one's own status and an appeal to community, Stevens' wish for the teas seems to have come true. Three days later, striking an altogether more sober tone, Stevens notes, in his letter to Kwok of December 20, 1935, "Yesterday . . . three boxes reached me, their contents in perfect condition. . . . What you have sent is precisely what I desired to have" (L 303). Finally, sounding a by-now-familiar chord, he notes, "Hearing about Central China and about Hankow, and now about Macao . . . somehow or other brings me in much closer contact with these places than I ever have had before" (L 303).

<sup>19</sup> For a fuller treatment of Ceylon, see Filreis' fine chapter "Description without a Sense of Place" in his *Actual World*.

<sup>20</sup> See "Imagination as Value," in which Stevens writes of the imagination as a "portal" (NA 155), or note the expression "of a port in air" (CP 76) in "Anecdote of the Jar."

<sup>21</sup> MacLeod describes the oil painting *Les Oliviers* as "a landscape painted in a fairly impressionistic style. It is neither abstract nor surrealist" (219 n 41). This would explain the "upper particular bough" in the poem.

<sup>22</sup> That Stevens used "tea" to refer to dinner is clear in a 1909 letter (derived from a notebook entry) I cited above, in which the young Stevens wrote to Elsie that he "came home on a car and read a little more in my novel, until it was time to go to tea. Such a shabby tea! Corned beef, cold salmon, dry biscuits, cocoa and chopped pine-apple! I hate that kind of thing" (L 142). Years later, in response to one of "Seven Questions" asked by the *Partisan Review* (Summer 1939), Stevens wrote, "I do not regard my poems as mainly an expression of myself, nor as modern in the sense in which that unpleasant commonplace is so frequently used. Still, some time ago, when I sent one of my books to an honest man in England, he wrote to me saying that he found it personal and modern, and that these qualities were not his dish of tea" (OP 310). That the British culinary expression "dish of tea" should replace the American gustatory expression "cup of tea" in this context raises the question about whether aesthetic judgment more closely reflects food or drink and suggests that the answer may depend either on national character or poetic sensibility. An anonymous reader of an earlier draft of this article notifies me that in Stevens' only reference to the poem "Tea" in *Letters*, Stevens mistakenly calls it "A Tea," a slip showing that he was thinking of a ceremonious occasion (and not just a beverage or a meal).

<sup>23</sup> For more on the connection between "tiger" and exoticism, see Stevens' "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock," whose second half reads: "People are not going / To dream of baboons and periwinkles. / Only, here and there, an old sailor, / Drunk and asleep in his boots, / Catches tigers / In red weather" (CP 66).

<sup>24</sup> One apparent constant in the portrayal of tea in Stevens' poetry is its association with absence, emptiness, and distance. As noted above, tea appears only as a titular presence in "Tea" and "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," whereas "Connoisseur of Chaos" speaks of Englishmen *without tea* in Ceylon, and in "The Man on the Dump" tea is associated with a presumably empty box (the tiger's chest).



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## Wallace Stevens' Defense of Poetry in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction"

JEANNINE JOHNSON

IN THE ESSAYS collected in *The Necessary Angel* (1951), Wallace Stevens presents his loosely ordered thoughts on the nature and purpose of poetry. Although Stevens calls these pieces "Essays on Reality and the Imagination," they amount to a sustained defense of poetry, in the tradition of Sidney, Shelley, Arnold, and Croce. That Stevens should repeatedly explore and declare poetry's value in prose is not surprising, since in this project he has been joined by some of the most prominent poets of the last and the current century, including Allen Tate, W. H. Auden, Robert Hayden, Muriel Rukeyser, Adrienne Rich, Geoffrey Hill, Seamus Heaney, and Robert Pinsky. But the question of why we should read poetry, and—more importantly to Stevens—why we should write it, motivates not only much of his prose but much of his verse as well. As early as *Harmonium*, the characteristics and goals of traditional apology appear in Stevens' poetry, and that tendency toward self-examination and self-defense increases as his career advances, peaking in the 1940s.<sup>1</sup>

Defending poetry is an especially significant operation in Stevens' signature composition, "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" (1942). Although the poem is much more than simply a verse apology for poetry, reading "Notes" as engaged in defensive strategies reveals something essential about the nature of the route toward the supreme fiction (if not about the supreme fiction itself). Furthermore, doing so can help us make sense of the prologue and epilogue, two parts of "Notes" that have received scant critical attention over the years, despite their being integral to one of Stevens' central works.

Before we turn to "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," we might ask why a poet would choose to defend poetry *in* poetry. One advantage of an apologetic stance in poetry is that it enables lyric to institute the self-reflection that it requires but that may be deterred or discouraged by what Stevens calls "the pressure of reality" (NA 20). Thus, a verse defense of poetry indirectly invokes the outside world as that against which it defines itself. But even though a defense implies some attempt at rhetorical persuasion, poetic apology ultimately does not address an unsympathetic



audience in order to convince it that poetry is of great value. It cannot reasonably do so, since poetry's audience is least likely to demand such a defense. With the possible exception of parts of "Owl's Clover," Stevens' verse defenses are not written for those who will never read them; instead, apology in poetry addresses poetry itself. As an instance of its own doctrine (to paraphrase Cleanth Brooks [*The Well-Wrought Urn* 12]), a verse defense doubles back on itself, answering to some internal interrogative voice rather than to an external skeptic.

This questioning of the worth of poetry is no inauthentic pose: Stevens seems to acknowledge a native rift within the imagination when he writes in "Adagia," "The poet represents the mind in the act of defending us against itself" (OP 199). Certainly at times in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction"—as well as in many other poems—Stevens represents the mind in the act of defending against a self-generated doubt about poetry's value. But even if this doubt is sincere, it is (somewhat surprisingly) not fatal to the poet: Stevens is most explicit about this in the late poem "Questions Are Remarks." In it the poet envies a young "voyant," admiring the fact that "His question is complete because it contains / His utmost statement" (CP 462). Stevens may well be admiring his own example of an undiminished declarative question, since he begins the poem, "In the weed of summer comes this green sprout why." This act of self-interrogation announces the poem's birth. The poet confirms that the question Why? roots naturally in poetry, delivering life amid a noxious growth of weeds. Stevens' organic metaphor recalls Shelley's idea of poetry as the tree of life, with individual poems as its scions, as if to suggest that there is something vital and natural about a poem's questioning of its own value (503). Although this green sprout why takes root and reproduces its question again and again, poetry does not wither under such self-induced stress but flourishes.

Of course, a defensive stance in poetry is not solely the product of spontaneous generation. The poet cultivates the "green sprout why" partly in order to sustain an interest in aesthetic inquiry: Stevens (with so many other American poets) feared society had become indifferent to this activity. He depicts his as "an age in which disbelief is so profoundly prevalent or, if not disbelief, indifference to questions of belief, poetry and painting, and the arts in general" (NA 171). Stevens accepts the challenge to counteract this sentiment repeatedly and with great seriousness, operating according to the conviction that, "If the answer is frivolous, the question was frivolous" (OP 199). The answer at which Stevens usually arrives is, to modify one of his statements from "Adagia," that we like poetry because we do.<sup>2</sup> For Stevens, there is nothing frivolous about this answer, but there is something unsatisfactory about it, and thus he must return again and again to the equally momentous question, Why write poetry?

The argument implicit in all of this is circular, as it suggests that one of the reasons to write poetry is to answer the question, Why write poetry?

In "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," this circularity is evident not only in the statements of the poem but in its form. Stevens frames "Notes" with two nearly discrete poems, a poetic structure unique among his longer works. Though the prologue and epilogue, too, are part of the supreme fiction, they differ greatly—in tone, purpose, theme, and images—from the main body of the text. They are in some sense annotations to the poem, and yet they do not fully explicate it: neither love (the subject of the prologue) nor war (the epilogue's theme) is the supreme fiction. The poem's head- and footnotes contain rather than explain the rest of the work, a circumstance that may account for their having received little sustained critical attention before now. They do not unify an interpretation of the main poem; instead, they defend the poem. And they do not so much defend what the poem says (or tries to say) as defend the act of writing a poem. The prologue and epilogue mark the boundaries of the central poem, and, more importantly, they stand as evidence that defense is the proper method of both entering and exiting poetry, especially a poem intended to adumbrate the supreme fiction.

Nevertheless, the framing poems do not conduct the poem to a single project of apology. The thirty notes that constitute the body of this poem contain provisional pronouncements, figures, and fables, variations on variations whose primary reference is to an indeterminate future. Together they do not comprise a unified defense of poetry any more than they comprise a cohesive supreme fiction. Stevens declined to append an explanatory note to the poem, maintaining that the contents of "Notes" "will have to speak for themselves" (L 407). Still, Stevens suggested to Katharine Frazier of the Cummington Press that the back cover of her limited edition of "Notes" display some lines from the epilogue, "enough" of that poem, Stevens ventured, "to state the idea" (L 408). Frazier complied with his request, printing around the back border the following: "Soldier, there is a war between the mind and sky, between thought and day and night. It never ends. How gladly with proper words the soldier dies, if he must, or lives on the bread of faithful speech."

The epilogue contains some of the most ostensibly straightforward statements in the poem and therefore recommends itself as one of the more excerptable sections. Yet it seems extraordinary that Stevens would wish to use this final poem, thematically and stylistically so unlike the rest of "Notes," as an advertisement for the whole. An epilogue—especially one like this—does not necessarily "speak for" or recapitulate the poem it follows. Later, as if to acknowledge that this selection was not representative of the poem, Stevens would identify printing parts of it on the back cover of the book as the "only thing [with respect to "Notes"] that I have ever felt any doubt about" (L 442). Although critics frequently quote this expression of Stevens' doubt, they less often refer to what immediately follows. In a partial retraction of his uncertainty, Stevens adds that the lines on the back border

are really all right in the sense that they relax the stiffness, and seem to me to be a pleasant kind of informality—like the colored boy that comes in after everything is over in *DER ROSENKAVELIER* and picks up the handkerchief that was left on the floor. (L 442)

The final action of *Der Rosenkavelier*, to which he compares the excerpt from the epilogue of “Notes,” is poignant for its superfluosity. A servant removes the Marschallin’s handkerchief, not to signal the end of her love affair with Octavian—there is no question that it is over—but to indicate the inadequacy of any symbolic gesture to summarize the preceding events. The opera ends rather as a comedy—albeit a conflicted one—as does “Notes.” After the poet’s flirtations with the “Fat girl, terrestrial” in section X of “It Must Give Pleasure,” he expresses self-confidence in his own actions (“That’s it”) and a faith in the future to recognize the virtue of what he does: “They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne” (CP 406). Nevertheless, a hint of disappointment lingers, as the triumph of the personal act—both the Marschallin’s and the poet’s—is mitigated by loss. As I will argue below, the discovery indicated by “That’s it” is one of a thing absent, and thus the phrase marks a failure of expression. For Stevens, the servant’s gratuitous gesture relieves any residual tension created by a conclusion in loss; and so too, Stevens’ letter suggests, does his own act of appending the epilogue to his poem.

Before we may understand what relief the epilogue provides, we must better understand the nature of the strain it undoes. Stevens’ reference to Strauss’s love story guides us back to the beginning of his poem, where we might seek clues to the tensions created in the main “Notes.” I will return to a full account of the epilogue, but for now I turn to the opening love poem:

And for what, except for you, do I feel love?  
Do I press the extremest book of the wisest man  
Close to me, hidden in me day and night?  
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 transparence that you bring is peace. (CP 380)

This initial poem may well be addressed to “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” itself, as Harold Bloom contends (168), or it may be addressed to the supreme fiction, which, if it can ever assume materiality or shape, it does so in poetry. Thus, in either case, here is a uniquely undisturbed statement of the value of poetry. This is as close as Stevens comes, in this poem at least, to saying that we like poetry because we do and that no further

defense of that certainty of feeling is necessary. The poet describes (as well as engenders) the paradoxical condition of achieving illumination through the obscuring act of the poem. He resides in "the uncertain light of single, certain truth" that illuminates a "living changingness . . . in which we sit at rest." The transparent truth revealed is not a vision but a feeling, one of peace. According to Bloom, this sensation is specifically "a peace that comes from reading and writing poems" (168).

Here is an example of the power of that instinctive, nonverbal faculty of comprehension that Stevens calls "sense." Poetry's worth is made self-evident in this perceptual field, and it is sense or feeling that communicates to us the profound reality of poems that, like the flowers in "Bouquet of Roses in Sunlight," seem "Too much as they are to be changed by metaphor" (CP 430). Sense, which "exceeds all metaphor," is not so much a medium as a property of human consciousness. It delivers the object of our admiration without altering—and thereby diminishing—it. Or so sense would make us believe:

We are two that use these roses as we are,  
In seeing them. This is what makes them seem  
So far beyond the rhetorician's touch. (CP 431)

Sense offers direct, unspoken communication with reality; but it is the reality of sense, and not the reality of an object, that it delivers. Sense also enables interpersonal communication—however indirect—between the multiple subjects implied by "we." This dual operation of sense—between the poet and his subject and between two persons—is analogous to one of love, but the love between poet and poem is unquestionably the more important of the two operations. After all, for Stevens, a poet is "*un amoureux perpétuel* of the world that he contemplates and thereby enriches" (NA 30). Love-as-sense contains this experience of metaphor and recurs as an important trope for measuring poetry's value. In "Notes," whose subject is the supreme fiction, the reality of sense is paramount, since it is precisely its *un*reality that defines the supreme fiction: indeed, it is Stevens' name for something in which we believe, even though we know it not to be true (L 443)

The opening triumph of "Notes" also comes about by means of the power of sense-love, and it is the poet's love for his poem and its subject that is the sole justification for his writing. The two rhetorical questions in this prologue recall the poet's pursuit of the "origin and course / Of love" (CP 18) in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle." There the poet's question, "Or was it that I mocked myself alone?" (CP 13), bespeaks an awareness of his own isolation and shows that the revelations of love have little to do with anything outside himself. (Stevens also seems to acknowledge the incongruity of mocking his vocation in verse: a poem that accuses itself of lacking worth may be akin to a tree falling in a forest, with its self-incriminating

noises going unrecognized by any third party.) By contrast, the love impulse in which "Notes" originates, as private as it is, also invites an outsider into this scene. We are invited to go out of our own nature and identify with this poem that is not our—and perhaps not even the poet's—own, even as this expression of satisfaction and affection is directed specifically toward the supreme fiction and the tropes of "Notes," language, designs, and goals.<sup>3</sup> The poet might have done well to place this poem at the end of "Notes," to utter a kind of final word. Instead, its certainty is perforce undermined by the poem to which it is dedicated.<sup>4</sup>

In simplest terms, the main poem is about everything: it is about everything that poetry does and cannot do, everything that it inscribes and that it excludes, everything that it is and fails to become. It is about intelligibility and confusion, the fictive and the real, reason and the imagination, belief and truth, love and self-derision, choice and chance, desire and power, civic life and literary traditions, angels and flowers, colors and time, nonsense and song. Above all, it is about poetry. "Notes" is marked by a formality in tone (there are scattered comic moments, but they exhibit a characteristic Stevensian stiffness), in subject, and in versification; yet this is no well-wrought urn. This is poetry becoming, not poetry being: it derives from necessity, exists in change, and tends toward a constantly deferred future.<sup>5</sup>

Given the extent of Stevens' reach, it is not surprising that F. O. Matthiessen criticized the poem for being overwritten. I am inclined to agree with Matthiessen but with the qualification that overwriting is part of Stevens' project here. The poet takes a risk (and occasionally his poem suffers for it) by including so much poetic ballast that has the potential, as Matthiessen says, to "make a museum and a mausoleum akin" (26). As if anticipating such a critique, Stevens arranges the poem according to three imperatives that are intended to prevent the supreme fiction from growing stagnant, monotonous, or permanent. The supreme fiction and the poem that tries to document it must be abstract, which is to say that they must both be distinct from the real:

Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea  
Of this invention, this invented world,  
The inconceivable idea of the sun. (CP 380)

The poem opens with this second command to enter the poem's man-made universe, a world of ideas that have only a distant correlation to objects (like the sun) in the actual world.

Abstractness also means that the poem and supreme fiction must remain forever conditional, never definitive: "The sun / Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be / In the difficulty of what it is to be" (CP 381). If Stevens does not entirely revoke our Adamic office to control the nonhuman world by language, then he at least reveals that such gestures are of

no consequence to nature. No biblical sanction can alter the fact that human beings are governed by what Stevens calls "desire" (which includes the desire to assert linguistic dominion over our experiences), while nature and all its citizens are free of these compulsions:

And not to have is the beginning of desire.  
To have what is not is its ancient cycle.  
It is desire at the end of winter, when

It observes the effortless weather turning blue  
And sees the myosotis on its bush. (*CP* 382)

Though the ever-renewed cycle of our desire is in some ways analogous to the cycles of the natural seasons, our longing for spring distinguishes us from the forget-me-not, which simply obeys its internal instructions to flower. It is part of the human condition to crave what is going to happen anyway, but this is not necessarily a lamentable circumstance for the poet. It may be our ability to forget (in contrast to the myosotis) that makes desire possible; and in forgetting and desiring and forgetting again, there remains the possibility of change and the possibility of more poetry.

The sun is able to endure being in the difficulty of what it is to be, but for the poem (and the poet) there is no security in such ontological fixity. The poet is confident of the poem's power to "refresh" life, and it is clear that the supreme fiction must change in order to avoid aesthetic stagnation and the ennui of an inactive imagination. The note of "a single phrase, ké-ké, / A single text, granite monotony" is "A sound like any other. It will end" (*CP* 394). Another note must always follow, to maintain a necessary "freshness of transformation" that is

The freshness of a world. It is our own,  
It is ourselves, the freshness of ourselves,  
And that necessity and that presentation

Are rubbings of a glass in which we peer.  
Of these beginnings, gay and green, propose  
The suitable amours. Time will write them down.  
(*CP* 398)

The autonomous world that poetry creates is not inert but is vital and active (and, notably, "green," like the sprout that is so productive in "Questions Are Remarks"). Need drives poetry to help us reconstruct an identity, dally over the idea of love, and imagine that time will assign us a place in history. None of these amusements is permanent in poetry, which must uphold its duty to abstraction and to variation.

These poetic transformations issue from "a will to change," and it is in change that pleasure, the final imperative, is possible. Pleasure is the ultimate good of poetry for Stevens: "The purpose of poetry is to contribute to man's happiness" (*OP* 194). Therefore in "Notes," poetry "is an hour / Filled with expressible bliss" (*CP* 404), and yet it is not even so circumscribed as that, nor so certain of its assertions. In a letter to Henry Church, to whom "Notes" is dedicated, Stevens tries to relate the inexpressible value of pleasure:

Jean Wahl's letter . . . says one thing that I like more than anything else, and that is that it gave him pleasure to read the NOTES. . . . Now to give pleasure to an intelligent man, by this sort of thing, is as much as one can expect; and certainly I am most *content*, in the French sense of that word, to have pleased Jean Wahl. (*L* 429–30)

Stevens seems to have achieved the equanimity that comes from serving both the intelligence and the imagination, an accord that he had hoped for, but failed to experience, in his more overtly political defense of poetry, "Owl's Clover."

Pleasure or contentment in itself is valuable emotionally to Stevens but it is also an important trope for him. If the "French sense" of "content" emphasizes an agreeable tension between still satisfaction and active delight, it also stresses the Latin derivation of the word, *continere* (*com* + *tenere*), meaning to contain or hold together. Stevens' contentment is contained, that is, self-satisfying, self-referential, self-evidencing. The condition of pleasure validates itself, allowing the poet to state, with almost no hint of irony, that "We like the world because we do" (*OP* 201). Pleasure's self-contained and broadly illogical operation is a model for the poet's defense of poetry. But just as illogical arguments only partially satisfy the intellect, so does delight only incompletely sate our appetite for joy.

Partiality is important since it allows the pursuit of pleasure to continue: the poet's satisfactions must also remain incomplete; otherwise poetry would be too much like torpor. For Stevens there is no transcendent "interpenetration"; pleasure is thoroughly human and it enables the poet to imagine someone else sharing his delight in (and through) poetry. Whatever inadequacies there are in this imagined communication (that it is ultimately unsuccessful is evident in the epilogue, as I will show), there is also enjoyment in failing to seize the object of one's desire, just as there is satisfaction in poetry's obscurities. Furthermore, imperfect fulfillment enables the poet to continue his pursuits. In pondering the nature of poetic language, Stevens says of his activity, "There's a meditation there, in which there seems / To be an evasion, a thing not apprehended or / Not apprehended well" (*CP* 396). The qualification of the last phrase admits a partial failure in comprehension. But the activity is not arrested; rather, it is

rerouted. Pleasure relies on change, even as change ensures a deferral of the poet's own desires.

The poet ultimately curtails this sequence of deferrals by appending a postscript to the neatly structured main poem. To be sure, there is not a complete disjunction between the epilogue and what precedes it.<sup>6</sup> In cantos IX and X of "It Must Give Pleasure," the poet defends the work involved in writing an abstract, changing, pleasure-giving poem, an exertion that is superior to the robin's "Mere repetitions." The poet insists that he, unlike the wren and the red robin, is not an idle singer: "These things at least comprise / An occupation, an exercise, a work" (CP 405). Or, as Stevens argues elsewhere, "One of the sanctions of the writer is that he is doing something that he needs to do" (OP 245). The final canto celebrates the "Fat girl, terrestrial" and confirms the reasonableness of maintaining the position that we like the world because we do. The poet is convinced and furthermore "Pleased that the irrational is rational," that is, that such unintelligible convictions (as his feelings toward "my fluent mundo") are valid and valuable.

Despite the final decree, the epilogue does not argue that poetry's pleasure-giving capacity is its chief value. The poet argues instead from necessity:

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

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

Yet it depends on yours. The two are one.  
They are a plural, a right and left, a pair,  
Two parallels that meet if only in

The meeting of their shadows or that meet  
In a book in a barrack, a letter from Malay.  
But your war ends. And after it you return

With six meats and twelve wines or else without  
To walk another room . . . Monsieur and comrade,  
The soldier is poor without the poet's lines,

His petty syllabi, the sounds that stick,  
Inevitably modulating, in the blood.  
And war for war, each has its gallant kind.



How simply the fictive hero becomes the real;  
How gladly with proper words the soldier dies,  
If he must, or lives on the bread of faithful speech.  
(CP 407–08)

The poet initially resists analogy, as the soldier's war is not merely a metaphor for the poet's struggles: one war is not derivative of or subordinated to the other. Like the roses in sunlight, the two wars may be "Too much as they are to be changed by metaphor" (CP 430). Poetry is necessary to balance the soldier's war (and vice versa), as it creates an equilibrium between the external violence among nations and the internal violence of the poet's mind.

Stevens refers to this stabilizing power in the summary of his essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words." He describes nobility, an essential element of poetry:

It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems, in the last analysis, to have something to do with our self-preservation; and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives. (NA 36)

Nobility is another of Stevens' tropes for the animating force behind a poem, whence derives a poem's value. Nobility is a function of nothing less than our instinct for self-preservation and through it poetry quite literally endows life with meaning. As Stevens intones in another prose context, "Life without poetry is, in effect, life without a sanction" (L 299).

Curiously, most critics who place great stock in poetry's political function find a certain satisfaction in this final poem.<sup>7</sup> It is curious because the epilogue, if read as an overt political statement, could be understood to romanticize war, to minimize death, and to identify with the soldier only in the most impersonal manner. At first, the poet assures the soldier that the poet's war "depends on yours. The two are one" (CP 407). Yet in the second address, to "Monsieur and comrade," the poet demonstrates his ambivalence about making such an argument, and the war in the poet's mind is no longer equivalent to the soldier's war. Poetic conflict is clearly promoted as the superior struggle: "The soldier is poor without the poet's lines" and "How gladly with proper words the soldier dies." If we are to take these statements literally—though, to be sure, this is not generally a useful practice in approaching Stevens' work—what some critics read as the poet restoring reality to the poem in fact diminishes the gravity of that reality. In other words, if the poet believes that the soldier in possession of a refined aesthetic sensibility can die gladly or live well as long as he has poetry, then the poet could be seen to discount any physical pain the sol-

dier may endure. It is unlikely that Stevens intended his poem to be understood in this way, but even if he did such a reading of the epilogue would not likely satisfy those eager for a statement demonstrating the poet's sensitivity to the political climate of 1942.

Moreover, the epilogue is not a statement on politics per se but is part of a defense of poetry, and specifically part of a defense of *this* poem and of the pursuit of a supreme fiction. Although the epilogue is in some ways detached from the rest of the poem, it is at least as much a response to what precedes it as it is to some condition or figure outside the poem. Poetry—the words on the page, “the literal characters” (CP 424) of this poem—is compensation. The poet appeals to the soldier by extolling this compensatory function of poetry, as it might appear in “a book in a barrack, a letter from Malay.” Poetry is a salve in the urgent circumstances of war. But the poet realizes that his appeal promotes the extrapoetic benefits of poetry rather than the poetry itself. By insisting on poetry's value in an emergency, the poet might minimize its significance in peacetime: perhaps in acknowledging this possibility, he intimates that the soldier, who returns “With six meats and twelve wines or else without,” leaves poetry behind on the battlefield.

The poet's subsequent shift of address belies the epilogue's ostensible return to the reality of its historical moment. After the implicit threat of the poem's being too much a part of its present circumstances, the poet confirms that we will find our reward in poetry in peacetime, as occurs in “Asides on the Oboe.” In that poem, a kind of notes toward “Notes,” the poet concludes that after a catastrophic period we come to know “The glass man, without external reference” (CP 251). Even the epilogue's soldier loses his martial context in that section. The soldier in “Notes” is a fiction, confected in order for the poet to have someone to whom to address his defense. He is an insufficient fiction, however, since the poet addresses “Monsieur and comrade,” presumably one of those “clairvoyant men” in “A Primitive Like an Orb” who “need no proof” of the poem's value (CP 441). This shift suggests that the defense of his poem is not directed toward those who would question poetry's merits, nor to those who would take issue with the circular logic of the apology, but to like thinkers, gentlemen (“monsieur”) and compatriots (“comrade”). The epilogue promotes the work of poetry and the pleasures that that work produces: poetry “is a war that never ends” but one that enables the soldier to die “gladly” or, better, to live “on the bread of faithful speech.”

The poet has suggested the extrapoetic benefits of his work, but he breaks off without completing a cohesive argument. The faith in his poetry that he professed in the prologue is not shaken, but it is much simpler to proclaim the value of the object or source of one's love than to persuade skeptics of its worth. Stevens' defense of poetry consists in a collapse of his discursive powers and a surrender to the question to which a defense responds. It is finally a belief in poetic language, a confidence that words

have both a material and a spiritual dimension that cannot be separated from each other, that will guide the reader away from the ambivalent rhetoric of the epilogue and return her to the poem.

In some ways, such a conclusion is to be expected, since Stevens' attempts to take war as his subject almost always result in a greater attentiveness to his poetry than to war. Poetry's responsibility is not the revelation of reality (understood in the conventional—not the Stevensian—sense) since poetry issues from a source within the poet. As Seamus Heaney argues,

even when the redress of poetry is operative . . . [as] instrumental in adjusting and correcting imbalances in the world . . . as an intended intervention into the goings-on of society . . . even then, poetry is involved with supreme fictions as well as actual conditions. (192)

Heaney points to the inevitable self-reflection even in poetry directed outward: a poet reaches the actual through his supreme fiction. He reiterates Stevens' formulation that "Poetry is a response to the daily necessity of getting the world right" when "the world" is understood as "the statement of a *relation* between a man and the world" (*OP* 201, 197, emphasis added).

*Parts of a World* (1942), published in the same year as "Notes," contains numerous poems with explicit reference to war. The collection ends with an ambivalent meditation, "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War," in which the poet considers the effect on the civilian imagination of the idea of a soldier-hero. (Similarly, "Gigantomachia" in *Transport to Summer* describes the effect of the idea of the hero on the soldier's own imagination.) The poet begins "Examination" by ventriloquizing the hero but is quickly dissatisfied with this device. The poet then casts the soldier in the role of an artist, and from that point on he maintains focus on his declared subject only with great difficulty.

He discovers that the hero is available neither by extracting the soldier from his professional environment nor by abstracting him into some unnatural role within a communal imagination.

He is the heroic  
Actor and act but not divided.  
It is a part of his conception,  
That he be not conceived, being real. (*CP* 279)

The poet insists that the hero exists only as an agent in reality—which cannot be imported whole into poetry—not as a figure in poetry or as "an image, an outline, / A design, a marble soiled by pigeons" (*CP* 278). It might seem that heroes are "Too actual, things that in being real / Make

any imaginings of them lesser things" (CP 430). Yet the poet does not fear doing an injustice to the soldier by casting his dangerous circumstances into a lesser and safer thing in verse or in sculpture: a fear of attenuating the real by containing it in metaphor would not recognize that

this effect is a consequence of the way  
We feel and, therefore, is not real, except  
In our sense of it. . . . (CP 430)

The hero is not found in a statue of a soldier or, for that matter, in a war poem. Rather,

The hero is a feeling, a man seen  
As if the eye was an emotion,  
As if in seeing we saw our feeling  
In the object seen. . . . (CP 278)

The poet solves his dilemma by concluding that the hero is a feeling, and feeling is the province of poetry. Stevens' poetry, even when it is directed toward examining a hero, ultimately takes up itself as its subject.

In "Notes," being in part an examination of the poet in a time of war, a meditation on the soldier follows a climax of feeling. In the final canto of "It Must Give Pleasure," the poet achieves an intense gratification. He does not discover the supreme fiction, but is confident that its pursuit is a worthy endeavor and that poetry is central to that aim.

That's it: the more than rational distortion,  
The fiction that results from feeling. Yes, that. (CP 406)

As he does in "A Primitive Like an Orb," Stevens here uses the phrase "That's it" not to mark the poem's terminal point but instead to announce its peroration (if we may so call the rather oblique summary that is contained in the epilogue of "Notes"). In any case, in both poems, the tone of finality in "That's it" is deceptive, and the statement voices what Frank Kermode calls "a rightness of feeling, not a claim to have completed a demonstration" (117). "That's it" confirms the production of pleasure, and it is this effect of poetry that "help[s] people to live their lives" (NA 29). Pleasure, as Kermode indicates, is more than a frivolous amusement, though it can be that, too: it is health, consolation, a play of language, liberation, justification, purification, relief, restitution, and more (116).

However we may define the poet's idea of pleasure, the implication of that idea is the same: namely, that poetry and its effects are indistinguishable for Stevens, a condition that makes his defense of poetry an example of begging the question it proposes to answer. The poet's statement "That's it" seems to prepare a revelation of some kind but instead turns back upon

itself by a near-repetition, "Yes, that." This feint toward conclusion presumes an argument that the poet has not made. "Yes, that" does not complete a discursive demonstration but simply affirms "the more than rational distortion, / The fiction that results from feeling." The deictic points to the poem itself (which is exemplary of all poetry) because it—and not arguments about it—proves its value: as Stevens says in a later poem, "*Poesis, poesis*, the literal characters, the vatic lines, / . . . spoke the feeling for them, which was what they had lacked" (CP 424). *Poesis* constitutes evidence of value for those who, once the poet speaks for them, require nothing more than his ongoing speech.

Such inconclusiveness allows for continued writing and for continued questioning, which itself is a source for more writing. Thus it is not surprising that at the end of the poem we do not encounter a completed defense of poetry but the question to which a defense responds. Stevens makes his more conclusive statements in the prologue rather than in the epilogue to acknowledge that his preferred audience will have made a prior commitment to poetry's value even before the poem begins. Stevens is keenly aware (to paraphrase one of his assertions from the letters) that people never read a defense of poetry well until they have accepted it (L 436). To wait until the end of the poem—a destination to be sought only by poetry's sympathizers—in order to propose his apology would be superfluous (and Stevens' association of the epilogue with the last act of *Der Rosenkavalier* suggests as much). Stevens begins "Notes" with an affirmation of belief in "you" (his poem and the supreme fiction), and, despite his attempts in the poem to unravel the nature of this fiction, he finds at the end of the poem that he cannot fix its presence in any satisfactory way. This seems entirely appropriate, since in this manner Stevens demonstrates what it is like to believe, as he thinks it necessary, in something that we know not to be true. By reversing the normal sequence of question and answer, Stevens anticipates the theory presented in "Questions Are Remarks" that there is desirability—if not conclusiveness—in questions and in the sowing, at the end of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," of a green sprout why.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> An incomplete list of the more important poems that engage in a defense of poetry would include: "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," "The Idea of Order at Key West," "The American Sublime," "Mozart, 1935," "Owl's Clover," "The Man with the Blue Guitar," "Asides on the Oboe," "Montrachet-le-Jardin," "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War," "Gigantomachia," "Esthétique du Mal," "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," "The Auroras of Autumn," "Large Red Man Reading," "Bouquet of Roses in Sunlight," "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," "A Primitive Like an Orb," "Questions Are

Remarks," and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." Interestingly, by the time of the poems of *The Rock*, Stevens seems to have all but exhausted his need to perform apology in his verse.

<sup>2</sup> The original reads, "We like the world because we do" (*OP* 201).

<sup>3</sup> Here I paraphrase Shelley, who defines love as "a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own" (487).

<sup>4</sup> This almost simultaneous affirmation and erosion of certainty is exactly what the supreme fiction is all about.

<sup>5</sup> To a certain extent, Stevens viewed the poem as unfinished, writing in 1954 to Robert Pack that "For a long time, I have thought of adding other sections to the NOTES and one in particular: *It Must Be Human*" (L 863–64).

<sup>6</sup> Bloom declares that "Cantos IX–X of *It Must Give Pleasure* fall together with the coda, addressing the soldier, as an epilogue not only to *Notes* but to all of Stevens' canon between 1915 and 1942" (200).

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Marjorie Perloff, "Revolving in Crystal"; James Longenbach, *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things*; and Denis Donoghue, *Connoisseurs of Chaos*.

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## “The Figure Concealed”: Valéryan Echoes in Stevens’ Ideas of Music

LISA GOLDFARB

*Too many waltzes— The epic of disbelief  
Blares oftener and soon, will soon be constant.  
Some harmonious skeptic soon in a skeptical music*

*Will unite these figures of men and their shapes  
Will glisten again with motion, the music  
Will be motion and full of shadows.  
—“Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz”*

### I

**W**ALLACE STEVENS SOUNDS a formidable call to the modern poet in the last stanzas of “Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz,” a call that the speaker of the poem utters with a note of urgency. Before we can no longer yield ourselves to poetry, before our disbelief prevents us from finding solace in the sounds of words, the poet must create figures through which we search for authentic expressions of ourselves. Stevens’ “harmonious skeptic” must and will do nothing less than revitalize poetry so that its music expresses the “motion” and uncertainty, the “shadows” of our modern experience.

In Stevens’ insistence that the poet create poetry that “glisten[s] again with motion,” we can simultaneously hear Paul Valéry’s ambition to musicalize poetry. Both poets find in musical ideas and techniques a language to clarify and execute their principal poetic aims: Valéry, to express the fleeting nature of the world in a finite, but regenerative form; and Stevens, to create a sense of wholeness or permanence in human experience, while at the same time remaining true to an ever-changing reality. When Stevens writes of the musical analogy in his prose or summons music in his poems, he can often express ideas and use language so similar to Valéry’s that, were it not for their different languages and cultural contexts, we could almost hear Valéry’s voice in unison. Although of the two poets, it is Valéry’s musical-poetic theory that is the more developed and comprehensive, in his poetry Stevens seems to give fuller voice to the musical theory that they share. My aim in this essay is to amplify the

Valéryan echo in Stevens' ideas of music, showing how, in Stevens' prose, his briefer discussions of music and the auditory basis of poetry touch upon and evoke Valéry's lifelong project to musicalize modern poetry. I will then suggest, before closing, how we might apply Valéry's musical vocabulary to a study of Stevens' poems. When we listen to the echo of Valéry's musical-poetic ideas in Stevens, we can, most importantly, appreciate the similarity in sensibility between these two great poets. But Valéry's theory promises more for future studies of Stevens: once we examine the way Stevens' briefer comments about music and poetry echo Valéry's more detailed theory, we might borrow from Valéry's critical vocabulary in order to achieve a more thorough understanding of the ways Stevens makes of poetry "a kind of music" (Rosu 14).

Most critics agree that Stevens' work, especially his finely wrought early verse, shows the mark of his interest in symbolist poetry and poetics. In Anna Balakian's study of the Symbolist movement and its "afterglow" (Balakian 156), she rightly maintains that for Stevens "'symbolist' is one of several manners possible to assume in writing poetry, rather than a total commitment" (Balakian 171). However, Stevens' understanding of the infinite in earthly terms, his thoughts about and poetic renderings of the role of the artist and, most importantly for the purpose of this study, his thoughts about the analogy between poetry and music all suggest Stevens' high regard for the symbolists. Michel Benamou closely studies points of philosophical difference between Stevens and Stéphane Mallarmé. Although "they differed in their way of coming to terms with the inescapable arbitrariness of language," Benamou maintains Stevens still shares with Mallarmé a belief in the "necessary relation between words and things" (Benamou 73). A "common direction," Benamou asserts, is that "both Stevens and Mallarmé envisage a 'supreme fiction,' " even though the shape that this fiction takes differs sharply (Benamou 51).

However critics may acknowledge Stevens' symbolist aspects, little critical work has been done to show the particular affinity between Valéry and Stevens, despite the fact that they share an admiration for the earlier generation of symbolists (especially Baudelaire and Mallarmé) and were themselves contemporaneous. Harold Bloom, Edward Kessler, and Frank Warnke all find parallels between Valéry and Stevens; yet it is only in his short study of Valéry, Rilke, and Stevens that Warnke comes closest to identifying the incantatory aspect of their poetry that links these two poets. When Michel Benamou wrote in 1972, "because Valéry is so derivative from Poe, Baudelaire, and Mallarmé, a parallel study with Stevens leads to duplication," the Valéryan strain in Stevens' work was, to a large degree, silenced (Benamou 145-46).

Clearly, one of the reasons why this parallel has not been pursued is, in part, due to the close correspondence between Mallarmé's ideas and practice of poetic musicality and Valéry's poetics. In many of his essays, Valéry acknowledges the great debt he owed Mallarmé. He often discusses his



reverence for Mallarmé, naming him the perfect embodiment of the poet, the one who breathed new life into his art and inspired others with the rigor of his thought and form, as well as with the exquisite beauty of his verse. Of the poems “Brise Marine” [“Sea Breeze”] and “Les Fenêtres” [“Windows”], Valéry writes “jamais vers . . . jamais parole plus décisivement, plus lumineusement musicale, ne m’étaient tombés sous les yeux” [“never before had verse or language more decisively, more luminously musical fallen beneath my eyes”] (Valéry, “Stéphane Mallarmé” *Oeuvres I* 667).<sup>1</sup> He goes on to write in this same essay that one simply cannot read Mallarmé’s verse “sans être forcé de porter la voix au chant” [“without being forced to transform one’s voice into song”] (*Oeuvres I* 667).

In Valéry’s essays and notebooks alike, one recognizes Mallarmé’s musical-poetic inspiration as the spur for Valéry’s sometimes longer and more sustained reflections. Valéry, in his prose, will theorize at greater length than Mallarmé about modulation in verse, yet we encounter it first in Mallarmé’s “Crise de vers” [“Crisis in Poetry”]. Mallarmé writes: “Selon moi jaillit tard une condition vraie ou la possibilité, de s’exprimer non seulement, mais de se moduler, à son gré” [“Late in coming, it seems to me, is the true condition or the possibility not just of expressing oneself but of modulating oneself as one chooses” (*SPP* 75)<sup>2</sup>] (*Igitur Divagations*, “Crise de vers” 244). Mallarmé’s understanding of the infinite and transformative capacity of words as well as the double nature of language—“brut ou immédiat ici, là essentiel” [“the immediate or unrefined word on one hand, the essential one on the other” (*SPP* 75)] (*Igitur Divagations*, “Crise de vers” 251)—are at the heart of Valéryan distinctions between prose and poetry. And if the symbolists’ two ways of rediscovering the analogy between poetry and music are, on the one hand “sensual” and on the other “intellectual,” Mallarmé, and Baudelaire before him, surely must be given the credit for inspiring Valéry and many other modern poets, including Stevens, to theorize and incorporate the forms and structures of music into their work (Balakian 43).

As close to Mallarmé’s poetics as they are, Valéry’s ideas do not simply duplicate those of his predecessor. Valéry scholars have recently shown how he departs from Mallarmé in significant ways, and it is largely in these ways that Stevens’ poetics closely resemble Valéry’s. It is well known that for Mallarmé “tout, au monde, existe pour aboutir à un livre” [“all earthly existence must ultimately be contained in a book” (*SPP* 80)] (*Igitur Divagations*, “Quant au livre” 267) and that the purified words of this book are “doué d’infinité jusqu’à sacrer une langue” [“so gifted with infinity that they will finally consecrate Language” (*SPP* 82)] (*Igitur Divagations*, “Quant au livre” 269). Crucially, for Mallarmé, then, “L’oeuvre pure implique la disparition élocutoire du poète, qui cède l’initiative aux mots” [“The pure work implies the disappearance of the poet as speaker, yielding his initiative to the words” (*SPP* 75)] (*Igitur Divagations*, “Crise de vers” 248).

Valéry scholar Christine Crow sees Valéry as transforming this central tenet of Mallarmé's poetics. She writes, "In contrast to Mallarmé's 'la Voix du Langage' [the Voice of Language] Valéry characterised poetry as 'le Langage de la Voix' " [the Language of the Voice] (Crow xvii).<sup>3</sup> Although both poets focus on heightening "the palpability of language itself," differentiating the language of poetry from ordinary or discursive language, the ends to which they aim are fundamentally different (Crow 13). Crow writes, "From the point of view of the self-referentiality of poetic language, two basically different attitudes are once more revealed. For Valéry, the substance of language must be increased in order to reveal the laws of being outside language . . . ; for Mallarmé, the same process leads to the manifestation of language itself" (Crow 35).

It is in Crow's grasp of Valéry's departure from Mallarmé—in Valéry's understanding that "the poet's task is to use the creative virtualities within language to reveal the creative virtualities of the human sensibility" (Crow 35)—where we find the most striking likeness between Valéry and Stevens. A focus on "the creative virtualities within language" is at the very heart of Stevens' work, as contemporary critics of Stevens Eleanor Cook<sup>4</sup> and Anca Rosu have shown. Of Stevens' many critics, Rosu comes closest to identifying the auditory and musical mechanisms of his poetry that demonstrate the way Stevens seems to bring Valéry's poetic theory to life. As Rosu details Stevens' poetic, her discussion resonates with the most important aspects of Valéryan theory. When she discusses how Stevens uses sound to upset conventional meaning or poetry as a mode of performance; when she explores the relationship between musical and linguistic meaning or the dialogic dimension of Stevens' verse, she could be referring to any number of Valéry's essays and countless notebook entries in which he considers the auditory or musical component of poetry. Although Rosu brilliantly explores Stevens' "metaphysics of sound," closely examining influences such as William James, Santayana, and Heidegger, she seems to miss, like Stevens' earlier critics, the close correspondence of Valéry's musical poetics and that of Stevens.<sup>5</sup>

Although there is little evidence that Stevens read Valéry's prose and poetry in a systematic manner, Stevens' letters reveal that he was certainly aware of Valéry's work through much of his own writing life. As early as 1935, Stevens wrote a letter comparing his own abstract cast of mind to Valéry's. He writes to Ronald Lane Latimer, "If there is any relation in my things to Valéry's, it must come about in such a way as this: It is difficult for me to think and not to think abstractly" (L 290). Again in 1941, referring to the French Symbolists (Mallarmé, Verlaine, Laforgue, Valéry, and Baudelaire), Stevens writes to Hi Simons, "if I have picked up anything from them, it has been unconsciously" (L 391). Stevens refers intermittently in his letters to Valéry in the 1940s and 1950s, and although the letters do not suggest he paid consistent, close attention to his work, they do indicate Stevens' high estimation of Valéry. To Barbara Church, in 1952,

he writes, “things to read often make me think of Valéry and his attitude toward literature” (L 737). Later in the same year he refers to “Lettres A Quelques-uns” [“Letters to a Few People”], which he was then reading (L 761). And certainly, one of his last projects before his death—writing prefaces to two of Valéry’s dialogues—suggests that this poet, whom Stevens saw as “living at the center of the world . . . far beyond me in so many things” (L 855), may have a stronger resonance in his work than critics have previously thought.

Before we turn to the Valéryan echo in Steven’s prose, let us first examine the contours of Valéry’s treatment of the musical analogy and his discussion of poetry’s auditory nature. Valéry’s comparisons between music and poetry, on their broadest level, concern the goals and aims of the two arts. Both seek to create the sense of a distinct musical and poetic universe, and both are auditory arts, which appeal to our sense of hearing. More often than not, however, when Valéry compares the two arts, he writes enviously of music and musicians. Unlike the musician who works with a clear non-referential language, the poet uses language that, as he writes in “Propos sur la poésie,” is made up of “un mélange d’excitations sensorielles et psychiques parfaitement incohérentes” [“a stimulating sensory and psychic mixture that is perfectly incoherent”] (*Oeuvres I* 1369). He explains that, unlike musical sound that appeals directly to the ear, language appeals to a listener for both sound and meaning, and both the musicality and logic of language are highly variable.

Central to Valéry’s poetic theory, then, is the way he sees the poet as having to negotiate the complex relationship that poetry has both to thought (sometimes called philosophy or discourse) and music. While poems reach toward linguistic meaning, their musical qualities pull the reader back toward sound. Valéry describes the ongoing movement of the poem as “le pendule poétique” [the poetic pendulum], a movement between sound (the physical properties of language) and sense (or abstract thought) (“Poésie et pensée abstraite,” *Oeuvres I* 1333). This conception of poetry as the perpetual motion between one and the other pole of language recurs in much of his prose. Valéry writes of the ambiguity of poetic musicality in his “Lettre à Madame C” [“Letter to Madame C”] and asserts that poetry’s delicate relationship to both thought and music is, perhaps, its most distinguishing feature.

La poésie n’est pas la musique; elle est encore moins le discours. C’est peut-être cet ambigu qui fait sa délicatesse. On peut dire qu’elle va chanter, plus qu’elle ne chante; et qu’elle va s’expliquer, plus qu’elle ne s’explique. . . . Mais par le rythme, les accents et les consonances, faisant ce qu’elle peut, elle essaye de communiquer une vertu quasi musicale à l’expression de certaines pensées. (*Oeuvres II* 1260)

[Poetry is not music; it is still less discursive language. It is perhaps this ambiguity that gives it its delicate distinctiveness. One might say that poetry will sing more than it does not sing; and that it will explain more than it does not explain. But by its rhythm, its accents and its consonance, doing what it can, poetry tries to communicate an almost musical force to the expression of certain thoughts.]

Valéry wrestles with defining the auditory dimension of poetry both to better understand its intrinsic musicality and to grasp the particular kind of meaning or thought that poetry creates. He insists, in essay after essay, that poetic thought is completely distinct from discursive thought. In contrast to ordinary discourse where language is transitive and immediate meaning is the object, the object of poetic language is to create a separate sense or mood by means of language that is physical or opaque, that prompts the reader to return to hear and reexamine its sounds repeatedly. We can only reach the thought of poetry if we suspend our search for finite meaning and abandon ourselves to the rhythms and texture of poetic language. Valéry thus calls upon poets to heighten the inherently musical qualities of poetry in order to forge a distinct poetic language. To do so, the poet must perceive the primacy of sound over meaning. He writes:

S'il est un vrai poète, il sacrifiera presque toujours à la forme . . . cette pensée qui ne peut se fondre en poème si elle exige pour s'exprimer qu'on use de mots ou de tours étrangers au ton poétique. Une alliance intime du son et du sens, qui est la caractéristique essentielle de l'expression en poésie, ne peut s'obtenir qu'aux dépens de quelque chose,—qui n'est autre que la pensée. ("*Cantiques spirituels*," *Oeuvres I* 455)

[If he is a true poet, he will almost always sacrifice to the form of the poem . . . that thought that cannot blend, that thought that demands that one use words or linguistic turns foreign to the poetic tone. An intimate alliance between sound and sense, which is the essential characteristic of expression in poetry, cannot be reached without the loss of something,—which is nothing other than the thought.]

Valéry reflects carefully on the relationship between poetic sound and thought and insists that, although the balance between the two elements is delicate, in the composition of poetry the poet always must consider the quality of poetic sound or tone above all else. He argues, consequently, that the modern poet must use all the tools of his craft to heighten poetic tone. To do so, he must exploit all the conventions that poetic form of-

fers:—"rimes, l'inversion, les figures développées, les symétries et les images" ["rhymes, inversion, developed figures, symmetrical structures, and images"] ("Questions de poésie," *Oeuvres I* 1294).

Although Valéry pays great attention to form in poetry, his concern is not for form in and of itself; rather, his understanding of form is bound to his focus on the creation of a distinct poetic voice. For Valéry, the language and form of the poem prompt us, as readers (and poetic speakers), to sever ourselves from the patterns of ordinary speech, forcing us to transform our voices. He insists, then, that we can recognize poetry when, in reading, we can no longer adhere to our ordinary speaking voices:

Il faut et il suffit, pour qu'il y ait poésie certaine . . . que le simple ajustement des mots, que nous allions lisant comme l'on parle, oblige notre voix, même intérieure, à se dégager du ton et de l'allure du discours ordinaire, et la place dans un tout autre mode et comme dans un tout autre *temps*. ("Cantiques spirituels," *Oeuvres I* 450)

[One recognizes real poetry when the simple adjustment of words, when we read aloud, obliges our voice, even our interior voices, to disengage from the tone and pace of ordinary discourse and place it as if it were in a completely different manner and in an entirely different *time*.]

Valéry elaborates on his ideas of voice in much of his prose. He writes that the voice draws the reader into the poem and sustains the movement of the poem itself. In "Première Leçon du cours de poétique," ["First Lesson in poetics,"] he defines the poem specifically in terms of the voice: "Un poème est un discours qui exige et qui entraîne une liaison continuée entre la *voix qui est* et la *voix qui vient et qui doit venir*" ["A poem is a discourse that demands and sustains a continuous liaison between the *voice that is* and the *voice that is imminent and that must come*"] (*Oeuvres I* 1349). Poetry, he writes in "Souvenir de Nerval," is "la divinisation de la Voix" ["the divinization of the Voice"] (*Oeuvres I* 597).

Convinced of the auditory essence of poetry, Valéry outlines a program to foster a poetic language that would help facilitate the poet's expressiveness—one that would heighten the inherently musical and, particularly, vocal aspects of language. Valéry pays great attention to the creation of a different class or system of words in poetry and, in one of his notebook entries, suggests that the poet must transform the words of ordinary speech into musicalized tools for poetic expression: "Épurer—redessiner, resignifier les choses, redissoudre et faire recristalliser les relations—Préparer des corps purs—Gamme" ["To purify—to redesign, to re-signify things, to redissolve and recrystallize relations between things—To prepare pure matter—Scale"] (*Cahiers I* 793).

Valéry discusses how such poetic words operate in poetry and frequently uses the term “résonance.” He explains that designated words in the poem operate similarly to the way instruments do in a musical piece, evoking strong emotions on the part of the listener. Valéry believes that the frequency with which poets use key words indicates to the reader their importance in the poem. Likening the effect of resonant words with the effect that the sounds of a cello might have on a listener of music, Valéry describes the power of resonant words:

Le seul timbre du violoncelle exerce chez bien des personnes une véritable domination viscérale. Il y a des mots dont la fréquence, chez un auteur, nous révèle qu'ils sont en lui tout autrement doués de résonance, et, par conséquent, de puissance positivement créatrice, qu'ils ne le sont en général. (“Première leçon au cours de poétique,” *Oeuvres I* 1356)

[The sole tone of the cello affects some people with a profound visceral feeling. There are words, in an author's works, that, uttered with frequency, are similarly endowed with an unusual resonance, and consequently, with a positively creative power, absent when otherwise spoken or used.]

The resonance that Valéry attributes to specific words in a poem distinguishes them from their discursive origin and serves to distance these key words from their referential content, urging the reader to listen repeatedly to them to search for a meaning beyond their more usual connotations.

In his notebooks Valéry elaborates on this different class of words and writes that “mots-musique” express what we yearn to know rather than what we already comprehend. For Valéry, poetry is the art that uniquely expresses the ongoing process of knowing.

Ce qu'il y a d'excitant dans les idées n'est pas idées—c'est ce qui n'est pas . . . pensé, ce qui est naissant et non né, qui excite.

Il faut donc des mots avec lesquels on n'en puisse jamais finir—qui ne sont jamais identiquement annulés par une représentation quelconque,—des mots-musique. (“Philosophie,” *Cahiers I* 516)

[What is exciting in ideas is not the ideas—it is what is not . . . thought, that which is in the process of being, not that which is already born, that excites.

We must have, therefore, words with which we are never quite finished—which are never canceled by a particular representation,—musical words.]

Unlike the words in discursive language, which are less significant than the meanings they convey, Valéry's "mots-musique" or poetic words assume an importance in themselves—in the way they sound, in their texture, and in their relation to other words in the poem. Their sounds and ambiguities do not express what already is, but rather the pursuit of knowledge or understanding. Valéry again refers to the musical power inherent in poetic words in his essay "Je disais quelquefois à Stéphane Mallarmé" ["I said sometimes to Stéphane Mallarmé"] and asserts that the power of poetic words lies in their ability to move us beyond their referential meaning. He writes: "Je veux dire que ces paroles nous intiment de *devenir*, bien plus qu'elles ne nous excitent à *comprendre*" ["I want to say that these words offer us a sense of becoming much more than they quicken our understanding"] (*Oeuvres I* 650).

Valéry's project to enhance the musical dimension of poetry is not restricted to his discussion of "mots-musique." Rather, he examines aspects of musical form more broadly and thinks about how poets might adopt such structures. As Valéry is uneasy about the critical tendency to view poems as finished products and prefers to stress the ongoing exchange between poet and reader at the heart of the poetic process, he is particularly interested in the musical structure of theme and variations.

"[J]e serais tenté . . . d'engager les poètes à produire, à la mode des musiciens, une diversité de variantes ou de solutions du même sujet. Rien ne me semblerait plus conforme à l'idée que j'aime à me faire d'un poète et de la poésie." ("Au sujet du Cimetière Marin," *Oeuvres I* 1501)

["I would be tempted . . . to engage poets to produce, similar to the way musicians do, a diversity of variants or solutions to the same subject. Nothing would be more in keeping with the idea that I like to cultivate of a poet and of poetry."]

Valéry advocates such adoption of musical form in poetry not for experimentation itself (as in the case of the surrealists, also his contemporaries); rather, such innovation allows the poet to render the poetic voice more exact in its expressiveness. When Valéry goes so far as to say that poets and readers should consider the poetic text as similar to the musical composition, it is so that we grasp the essentially performative and vocal aspect of poetry.

Un poème, comme un morceau de musique, n'offre en soi qu'un texte, qui n'est rigoureusement qu'une sorte de recette; le cuisinier qui l'exécute a un rôle essentiel. Parler d'un poème en soi, juger un poème en soi, cela n'a point de sens réel et précis. C'est parler d'une chose possible. Le poème est une abstrac-

tion, une écriture qui attend, une loi qui ne vit que sur quelque bouche humaine, et cette bouche est ce qu'elle est. ("De la diction des vers," *Oeuvres II* 1255)

[A poem, like a piece of music, offers only a text in itself, which is only strictly speaking a sort of recipe; the chef who implements it has an essential role to play. To speak of a poem in and of itself, to judge a poem in and of itself, has absolutely no real nor precise meaning. It is more accurate to speak of a virtual or possible thing. The poem is an abstraction, a piece of writing that awaits, a law that only lives through some human mouth, and this mouth is what a poem is.]

Valéry emphasizes the oral and vocal nature of the poem in his assertion that like the musical composition that is silent until brought to life by the instrumentalist, a poem offers only a "recette" until it is spoken or sung. Conceived as "abstraction" or "chose possible" in the poet's mind, then recorded in writing "qui attend" for an interpretive voice, the poem ultimately must (as "une loi") be understood through its performance or recital by the reader. Dependent on "quelque bouche humaine," the poem occurs in the act of human speech. Hence Christine Crow's understanding of Valéry's poetics as "the poetry of voice."

Of all elements of music that Valéry admires, it is from music's natural expression of what he names "transformations"—changes in psychological states, shifts in perception, as well as the changes more manifest in the world about us—from which he draws his greatest poetic inspiration. Recognizing the power of musical modulation to express all ranges of changes in states, Valéry proclaims in his notebooks, "L'idée de modulation comme je l'entends me ravit plus que toutes" ["The idea of modulation, as I understand it, enraptures me more than any other"] ("*Ego Scriptor*," *Cahiers I* 297). Valéry's attempt to represent poetically modulation is synonymous with his own primary poetic objective to create a poetic voice through which he might express his own changing perspective as it encounters the ever-changing world.

Valéry reminds his readers both of the centrality of voice and poetry's oral origins in his essay "Victor Hugo" and calls attention to the consistency of his modern theory of poetry with the history of his art. The distinguishing features of oral poetry—form, sound, and poetic exchange between speaker and listener—are exactly those poetic aspects that we have just suggested are at the center of Valéry's modern poetics.

[I]l suffit d'observer que la littérature primitive, celle qui n'est pas écrite, celle qui se garde et ne se transmet que par les actes de l'être vivant, par un système d'échange entre la voix articulée, l'ouïe et la mémoire, est une littérature nécessairement rythmée,



parfois rimée, et pourvue de tous les moyens que peut offrir la parole pour créer le souvenir d'elle-même, se faire retenir, s'imprimer dans l'esprit. (*Oeuvres I* 584)

[It is enough to observe that primitive literature, that which is not written, that which is preserved and only transmitted by the acts of a living being, by a system of exchange between the articulate voice, the sense of hearing and memory, is a literature that is necessarily rhythmic, sometimes rhymed, and is provided with all the means available to language in order to create remembrance itself, so that it is retained, so that it is imprinted in the mind.]

## II

Stevens, like Valéry, devotes attention to the traditional bond between poetry and music and, although he does not reach back to poetry's origins in song to discuss the bond between the two arts, he defines modern poetic music in relation to the conventional music of poetry, "metrical poetry," which, "with [its] regular rhyme schemes repeated stanza after stanza" (NA 125), created an actual music. When Stevens casts aside this traditional understanding of the music of poetry as "anachronistic" (NA 125), he seems, at first to offer only a striking contrast with Valéry. However, Stevens still insists upon music as a vibrant analogy for poetry. In the way he draws strong distinctions between discursive and poetic language, places voice at the center of his poetics, considers the relationship between style and voice as well as the irrational nature of poetic knowledge, he echoes Valéry's central ideas about the musicality of poetry. He writes in "The Effects of Analogy" of the shift from traditional to modern poetic music:

[Y]esterday, or the day before, the time from which the use of the word "music" in relation to poetry has come down to us, music meant something else. It meant metrical poetry with regular rhyme schemes repeated stanza after stanza. All of the stanzas were alike in form. As a result of this, what with the repetitions of the beats of the lines, and the constant and recurring harmonious sounds, there actually was a music. But with the disappearance of all this, the use of the word "music" in relation to poetry is . . . a bit old hat: anachronistic. . . . It is simply that there has been a change in the nature of what we mean by music. It is like the change from Haydn to a voice intoning. It is like the voice of an actor reciting or declaiming or of some other figure concealed, so that we cannot identify him, who speaks with a measured voice which is often disturbed by his feeling for what he says. There is no accompaniment. If occa-

sionally the poet touches the triangle or one of the cymbals, he does it only because he feels like doing it. Instead of a musician we have an orator whose speech sometimes resembles music. We have an eloquence and it is that eloquence that we call music every day, without having much cause to think about it. (NA 125–26)

Although Valéry and Stevens both look to poetry's musical past to better define the contours of modern poetry, their views of its musical heritage differ in one essential way. Whereas Valéry asserts the bond between his own poetic practice and the origins of the art, Stevens insists that there has been a sharp break between "yesterday" and today. However, in the way Stevens places voice at the center of his modern poetic music, he strikingly recalls Valéry's writings on the subject. In the above passage, Stevens clearly locates the musicality of modern poetry in the voice and the tones and feeling of the poetic speaker. Although the change in the music of modern poetry is, as Stevens maintains, a change from actual music to speech, Stevens insists that the poetic voice does not speak plain speech: we listen to poetic speech as we listen to an actor's voice, more attentive to his tone and changes in his manner of speaking so that we can better distinguish the mood and feeling behind what is spoken. Stevens stresses the importance of the poetic voice when he refers to the speaker's identity as hidden. If we can neither see the speaker, nor clearly identify him, we listen more closely and attentively to his voice.

Stevens' description of this "figure concealed" and the way we, as readers, listen to him, recalls Valéry's description of the sense to which music and poetry is directed: "l'ouïe, qui est le sens par excellence de l'attente et de l'attention" ["hearing which is the sense, par excellence, of expectation and attention"] ("Propos sur la poésie," *Oeuvres I* 1369). For both poets, the voice is so much the cohesive force of the poem that, as Valéry writes, "Ôtez la voix et la voix qu'il faut, tout devient arbitraire" ["Remove the voice, the voice that must be, and everything becomes arbitrary"] ("Première leçon du cours de poétique," *Oeuvres I* 1349).

Stevens' insistence on those aspects of the poetic voice that distinguish it from ordinary speech summon Valéry's in-depth analyses of the distinctions between discursive and poetic language. Stevens' modern voice may be closer to speech than to Valéry's "vertu quasi musicale" ["almost musical force"] ("Lettre à Madame C," *Oeuvres II* 1260), yet in his insistence on a heightened or distinct voice—his "voice intoning," his "measured voice," and on its occasional resemblance to music—he preserves key Valéryan distinctions between poetic and discursive language. When Stevens emphasizes that the modern music of poetry is, in part, to be found in the speaker's expression of feeling—in a voice "often disturbed by his feeling for what he says"—he recalls Valéry's admiration of the musical property of modulation. Although Stevens' speaker speaks with a more

unpredictable rhythm, a more changeable or variable voice than Valéry's, both poets claim that poetry speaks, not finite thoughts but rather, as Stevens writes, "the rhythms and tones of human feeling" (*OP* 289).

Stevens, in "Two or Three Ideas," considers the unity of styles of poems, gods, and men, and asserts that "the style of the poem and the poem itself are one" (*OP* 257). Of style Stevens writes:

Style is not something applied. It is something inherent, something that permeates. It is of the nature of that in which it is found, whether the poem, the manner of a god, the bearing of a man. It is not a dress. It may be said to be a voice that is inevitable. (*OP* 263)

Stevens aims to convince his reader that style, contrary to our more superficial assumptions, is not merely an external quality. Style or the manner of presentation is the embodiment of the poem, god, or man. To stress its expression of what is intrinsic to the poem, Stevens relates style to voice: the style "may be said to be a voice that is inevitable." Although Stevens does not, as Valéry does, write specifically of form and elaborate on its creation of the voice, the way he relates the external shape of the poem to its voice echoes Valéry's discussion of form and voice. For Stevens, as for Valéry, the manner of presentation of the poem—whether it is in the shape of conventional poetic form or its overall manner or style—is at one with its voice. From its shape issues, for Valéry, "*la voix . . . qui doit venir*" ["the voice . . . that must come"] (*Oeuvres I* 1349) and, for Stevens, "a voice that is inevitable."

Just as important as his discussion of the vocal musicality of modern poetry, in Stevens' understanding of the primacy of sound in poetry we can hear the Valéryan echo most sharply. In "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," Stevens writes:

And what about the sound of words? . . . I do not know of anything that will appear to have suffered more from the passage of time than the music of poetry and that has suffered less. The deepening need for words to express our thoughts and feelings which, we are sure, are all the truth that we shall ever experience, having no illusions, makes us listen to words when we hear them, loving them and feeling them, makes us search the sound of them, for a finality, a perfection, an unalterable vibration, which it is only within the power of the acutest poet to give them. Those of us who may have been thinking of the path of poetry, those who understand that words are thoughts and not only our own thoughts but the thoughts of men and women ignorant of what it is they are thinking, must be conscious of this: that, above everything else, poetry is words; and

that words, above everything else, are, in poetry, sounds. (NA 31–32)

Like Valéry, Stevens directly addresses the question of the primacy of poetic sound, proclaiming sound at the very basis of the poem in his opening words and throughout the above passage. He expresses his poetic aims in auditory terms: both the poet's and reader's pursuit of truth is a search through sound for sound. As words in poetry "are, above everything else . . . sounds," when we read poetry, we embark on an auditory search "for all the truth we shall ever experience." He suggests that our auditory search intensifies as we approach a sense of the truth: first we hear words, and as we listen more attentively, we grow to love and feel them so that we "search the sound of them" for a sense of wholeness or the truth. Stevens' description of the vibrancy of sound in the poem and the reader's auditory search for truth strikingly recalls Valéry's discussion of the poet's concern with poetic tone over every other consideration. Both poets stress that the poet's primary concern is sound or tone, and that as sounds, poetic words express a meaning that must be understood in auditory terms.

In his metaphors for the truth—"a finality, a perfection, an unalterable vibration"—Stevens insists that in poetry we search, not for concrete meaning, but for a sense of completion, and he recalls Valéry's understanding that poetry creates something other than finite meaning—the sense of a world separate from, yet one that bears relation to, the world of our experience. With Stevens' auditory image of the "unalterable vibration," he underscores both the auditory nature of poetry and creates an image reminiscent of Valéry's poetic pendulum. For both poets, we listen to the poet's words, not to find at the poem's end a comprehensible or fixed truth, but rather an ongoing sound, a "vibration," an interchange between sound and sense that is for a moment "unalterable." For the moment of its sounding, the poem, for both Valéry and Stevens, provides us with a sense that allows us to know how the truth might feel.

One idea underlies and unifies both Stevens' and Valéry's understanding of sound and poetry: both poets contend that poetry reaches toward a kind of knowledge that is beyond reason and, for the reader to apprehend such meaning or knowledge, she must, at least for a time, suspend reason. In "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," Stevens echoes Valéry when he writes that poetry expresses "the thoughts of men and women ignorant of what it is they are thinking." Although in "The Noble Rider" Stevens does not probe exactly how the poet brings to life those distinctive thoughts of poetry beyond his assertion that it happens through the sounds of words, his suggestion that poetry is, in part, an "unconscious" process certainly echoes Valéry. In "Two or Three Ideas" and "The Effects of Analogy," Stevens again returns to the question of sound and poetic language, and markedly recalls Valéry.

Stevens' purpose in "Two or Three Ideas" is to discuss the modern need, even urgency, for poetry "to elevate the poem to the level of one of the major significances of life" (*OP* 262). To do so, he equates his subject—styles of poems and poems themselves—with styles of gods and men. Although he does not discuss the process of sound as it pertains to the poetic process as directly as he does in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," in the way Stevens urges his readers to accept the truth of his proposition—that poems occupy as vital a place in life as gods and men—he stylistically demonstrates how we come to recognize truth in poetry largely through sound and particularly through repetition. In the following passage, the way Stevens uses repetition to guide the reader toward a sense of truth recalls Valéry's more detailed discussion of how poets use resonant poetic words so that the reader repeatedly turns back to the poem to listen to the sounds of poetry.

Now, if the style of a poem and the poem itself are one; if the style of the gods and the gods themselves are one; and if the style of men and men themselves are one; and if there is any true relation between these propositions, it might well be the case that the parts of these propositions are interchangeable. Thus, it might be true that the style of a poem and the gods themselves are one; or that the style of the gods and the style of men are one; or that the style of a poem and the style of men are one. As we hear these things said, without having time to think of them, it sounds as if they might be true, at least as if there might be something to them. (*OP* 262)

Stevens posits that there is a unity between style and meaning as it pertains to poems, gods, and men and he reestablishes this belief at the beginning of the passage. Once he reiterates this, he asks the reader to accept an idea that he has not previously discussed: "that the parts of these propositions are interchangeable." He then proceeds to interchange one proposition for another: "it might be true that the style of a poem and the gods themselves are one," etc. As Stevens changes the order in which he uses these words, it becomes progressively more difficult to retain the concepts, to hold onto the meanings of the words. By so repeating the familiar words and sounds of the essay, Stevens posits a truth, perhaps greater than the meaning of the words themselves. He thus aims to urge our acceptance by rhetorical means, specifically by repeating the sounds of the words. As we listen to the words repeated ("As we hear these things said"), we suspend our reason ("without having time to think of them") and we begin to perceive that the words speak a truth ("it sounds as if they might be true"). Stevens thus employs the very process that Valéry insists is fundamental to the composition and understanding of poetry to convince his readers of a truth he believes cannot be reached solely by

discursive means. By repeating the familiar sounds of the argument, Stevens, like Valéry's poet, dislocates the rational meaning that the reader expects the words to convey, hoping to draw his reader closer to the truth of his proposition.

The greatest point of convergence between Stevens and Valéry is their belief that poetry unleashes divergent ways of knowing and perceiving the world about us and within us. Valéry's discussions of resonant poetic language and his discussions of repetition in the poetic process, all work to elucidate the poet's musical craft—how he might give shape to this particular kind of poetic knowledge. In "The Irrational Element in Poetry," Stevens once again echoes Valéry when he writes that the poet uses the sounds of words to achieve a particular effect, what he calls "a momentary existence on an exquisite plane" (*OP* 228). The poet himself, according to Stevens, is probably not aware, in rational terms, of why he uses one word or sound rather than another. He writes of the poet, "You have somehow to know the sound that is the exact sound; and you do in fact know, without knowing how. Your knowledge is irrational" (*OP* 231). If in these words Stevens summons Valéry's more detailed study of how poetic words function to dislocate meaning and chart "ce qui est naissant" in "The Effects of Analogy," Stevens echoes in a few words the essence of Valéry's musical-poetic project. He also achieves what is perhaps his most poignant definition of poetry.

There is always an analogy between nature and the imagination, and possibly poetry is merely the strange rhetoric of that parallel: a rhetoric in which the feeling of one man is communicated to another in words of exquisite appositeness that takes away all their verballity. (*NA* 118 )

Stevens suggests that we write and read poetry to explore the most ever-present analogy of all—that which exists between nature and our imagination. To that end, he argues, we use words to create a language, "a strange rhetoric." To grasp our imaginative part in the greater world about us, to communicate our feeling, Stevens contends, we use poetic language. However, like Valéry, Stevens insists that the words that we use to grasp the relationship between our inner world and the world external to our minds are not the same words that we use to transmit our more circumscribed thoughts. Rather, according to both Stevens and Valéry, words in poetry undergo a stunning transformation.

### III

If Stevens stops short of theorizing about his poetic project in explicit musical terms in his essays, the reverse is the case in his poetry. As we have noted earlier, Valéry's more comprehensive musical project anticipates Stevens' poetic one, and Stevens seems to practice aspects of the

musical-poetic theory that he shares with Valéry with great versatility. When we look at Stevens' entire body of poetry, from his early to late poems, we can discern a more thorough working out of some of the key components of Valéry's project to transform poetic language according to musical principles. Although it would be beyond the scope of this essay to examine this "musicalization" in Stevens' verse in an exhaustive way, I will briefly address the range of Stevens' experimentation with some of the ideas set forth above.

Readers of Stevens' poetry have long recognized his musical virtuosity; one cannot read his work without noticing the abundance of musical figures and structures, metaphors, and auditory images in his verse. In early poems such as "To the One of Fictive Music," "Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz," and "Peter Quince at the Clavier," Stevens repeatedly addresses the analogy between poetry and music and, in doing so, touches upon key aspects of Valéry's treatment of the subject in prose. As Valéry addresses the common origins of music and poetry in his essay "Victor Hugo," so does Stevens in poetry, as he summons the mythical birth of the twin arts of music and poetry in "To the One of Fictive Music." The poetic speaker calls upon the poet to reclaim the musical sources of his art. He refers to the "music" that voices our human separation from the natural world—"the music summoned by the birth / That separates us from the wind and sea" (CP 87)—and commands the poet as "musician" to "give back to us" the sense of our own origins: "The imagination that we spurned and crave" (CP 88). In "Mozart, 1935," Stevens addresses the relation between the poet and musician more directly as he calls upon the poet to "be seated at the piano," this time evoking not the musical origins of poetry, but rather the "present" and, in sound images that become a regular feature of his poetry, Stevens offers the reader an auditory sense of the present in all its pre-linguistic chaotic motion—"its hoo-hoo-hoo, / Its shoo-shoo-shoo, its ric-a-nic, / Its envious cachinnation" (CP 131).

Music is further extended in "Peter Quince at the Clavier" to our interior world and is composed not only of the sounds uttered by the piano keys but also, as the speaker says in the opening section of the poem, the effect of the sounds on the speaker's own spirit: "Music is feeling, then, not sound" (CP 90). In the way that the speaker internalizes sound and feeling, "Thinking" (CP 90), too, becomes a kind of music. One can hardly encounter this poem without thinking of Valéry's own aim to poeticize the musical property of modulation. Stevens continues to address the musical-poetic analogy in later poems as well. In "Of Modern Poetry," we find the poet, as both the "actor" and "metaphysician in the dark, twanging / An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives / Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses" (CP 240). The poetic "actor" in this poem—so reminiscent of the "figure concealed," who "speaks with a measured voice" in "The Effects of Analogy"—rekindles the musical analogy to re-

vitalize modern poetry; that is, to create what Stevens calls "The poem of the act of the mind" (CP 240).

Although Stevens addresses the musical analogy in many of the later poems, with musical and auditory images a constant feature of his verse, his musical references increasingly point to a music that is less tangible than his frequent images of instruments and singers suggest. In later poems, he is more concerned with a poetry that transcends linguistic meaning—a meaning neither purely discursive nor entirely musical, more akin to what he calls, in "Credences of Summer," "Pure rhetoric of a language without words" (CP 374). Although Stevens does not declare his musical-poetic intention in any single poem, he certainly suggests in many poems a search not for the correspondence between poetry and music, but for a language that is, in Valéry's terms, "transformed."

In "The Creations of Sound," Stevens writes, "We say ourselves in syllables that rise / From the floor, rising in speech we do not speak" (CP 311). Language, Stevens imagines here, is not composed of words with clear or fixed meanings; rather the words become like Valéry's "mots-musique," sounds that are organized into a distinct system of relations, tools that indicate the process of knowing, not finite thought. In "Saint John and the Back-Ache," the speaker proclaims, "I speak below / The tension of the lyre" (CP 437). If poetic words operate differently than the words of ordinary discourse do, they also do not correspond neatly to musical instruments; the speaker's words are "below" the instrument's register. In "Pieces" the speaker asserts, "There is a sense in sounds beyond their meaning," again reminding us that in poetry we search not for concrete meaning (CP 352). Rather, to use Valéry's image in "Poésie et pensée abstraite" ["Poetry and Abstract Thought"], such meaning arises out of a pendulum-like movement between sound and sense.

In much of his poetry, however, Stevens neither directly addresses the musical-poetic analogy nor clarifies exactly what he means by a "Pure rhetoric of a language without words." If we consider many of Stevens' poems as negotiating the relationship between these musical ends—from the explicit musical analogy to a more thorough linguistic transformation—Valéry's theory may offer us a wider vocabulary with which to grapple with the more complex aspects of Stevens' verse. For Stevens experiments with precisely those features of musical poetry about which Valéry theorizes. He experiments with sound to dislocate meaning and repeats particular words endowing them with a resonance unique to their poetic usage. He engages the reader in an ongoing exchange in the creation of poetry's distinct kind of meaning, and he heightens the poetic voice much in the way Valéry discusses in his prose.

Consider, for example, in "The Idea of Order at Key West," how Stevens invites the reader to search for the distinction (if there is to be one) between the sound of the singing woman by the sea and the sound of the sea itself. With the constant repetition of "she" and "sea" (CP 128), Stevens



practices what Valéry understands as “résonance”: the repetition undercuts the meaning of the words, and the reader searches for sense through sound. In “Evening without Angels,” Stevens successfully carries the heavenly angels down to earth, largely through his use of the voice. He begins the poem with a question—“Why seraphim like lutanists arranged / Above the trees?” (CP 136)—that the poetic speaker subtly, yet insistently answers in the body of the poem, until the last stanza when he uses Valéry’s own term of modulation in the poem itself:

... Evening, when the measure skips a beat  
And then another, one by one, and all  
To a seething minor swiftly modulate. (CP 137)

The poetic voice that closes “Evening without Angels” seems to grow out of the exchange between speaker and reader. As the reader is drawn into the speaker’s own questions and answers, we discover, along with him, the power of the poetic voice that evokes both Valéry’s “*voix . . . qui doit venir*” [“voice that must come”] and Stevens’ “voice that is inevitable.” Speaker and reader occupy the same place with the same regard at the end of the poem, both having discovered the power of our collective human voice:

Where the voice that is in us makes a true response,  
Where the voice that is great within us rises up,  
As we stand gazing at the rounded moon. (CP 138)

Even an overview of the Valéryan echo in Stevens’ poetry would be incomplete without our noting how often Stevens transposes musical form to a poetic context. In “Peter Quince at the Clavier,” Stevens patterns his poem on sonata form, with each section of the poem approximating the structure and tempo of each of the movements characteristic of a sonata. But it is particularly Stevens’ consistent use of the musical structure of theme and variations—in such poems as “Sea Surface Full of Clouds,” “Variations on a Summer Day,” and “Credences of Summer”—where we see Stevens practice the form that Valéry insists is most consistent with his understanding of poetry. That these techniques in Stevens’ poetry constitute his way of revitalizing poetic language has certainly been noted by many critics. I am suggesting here that we acknowledge how marvelously in tune Stevens’ techniques are with those musical-poetic principles that Valéry addresses in his theoretical writings.

To express the ever-moving world in a form that allows us to contemplate our condition without appearing to fix that movement, to write poetry that offers respite from the relentless change of the world, Valéry insists that the poet must create a language totally distinct from discursive language. He calls for a musical-poetic language “aussi différent du langage

pratique que le sont la langue artificielle de l'algèbre ou celle de la chimie" ["as different from practical language as the artificial language of algebra or chemistry"] ("Les droits du poète sur la langue," *Oeuvres II* 1264). To create such a poetic language, Valéry sets out to musicalize poetry. In that program, he calls on poets, both to heighten the already auditory dimension of poetry and borrow musical ideas and structures. As we have seen, Stevens, in prose and poetry alike, focuses on exactly those elements upon which Valéry bases his musical endeavor. In Stevens' metaphoric suggestion in "The Effects of Analogy" that the poet transform language into "words of the exquisite appositeness that takes away all their verblivity," we can hear Valéry's voice in unison. Although he does not name music for that nonverbal poetic language, Stevens verges on defining a musicalization of poetry and calls forth Valéry's lifelong project.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> All translations of Valéry's work are my own.

<sup>2</sup> All translations of Mallarmé refer to the work of Mary Ann Caws, as collected in *Mallarmé's Selected Poetry and Prose*, cited as *SPP*.

<sup>3</sup> Crow goes on to strengthen the distinction between the two poets: "In choosing to reflect the phrase [*the Poetry of Voice*] in the title of this book, I have made the possible strength and originality of Valéry's transformation of Mallarmé's poetics one of my principal concerns" (xvii).

<sup>4</sup> Eleanor Cook, in particular, discusses Stevens' complex use of what Valéry would call the "physical" attributes of poetic language and their bearing on thought and meaning.

<sup>5</sup> Anca Rosu has done the most thorough study of sound in Stevens. Her chapters on "Sound and Knowledge" and "Sound and Poetry" are particularly pertinent to any study of Stevens' musical practice.

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# “A Little Hard to See”: Wittgenstein, Stevens, and the Uses of Unclarity

ANDREW OSBORN

## I

IN A LETTER DATED March 27, 1922, Wallace Stevens informed *Poetry's* assistant editor Alice Corbin Henderson that his poems were “not intended to be either deep, dark or mysterious”:

Whatever can be expressed can be expressed clearly. Épater les savants is as trifling as épater les bourgeois. But one cannot always say a thing clearly and retain the poetry of what one is saying. (CPP 937)

The first of these three sentences could serve as a translation of the part of proposition 4.116—“Alles, was sich aussprechen läßt, läßt sich klar aussprechen”—that Ludwig Wittgenstein slightly reworded in his preface to sum up “the whole sense” of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, published in German a year earlier (*T* p. 3).<sup>1</sup> More significant than this coincidence of phrasing, however, are the parallels between Stevens’ suggestion, after the interval of a sentence, that what is said poetically must sometimes be unclear and Wittgenstein’s reappraisal, after the interval of a decade, of his Tractarian assumptions regarding everyday language’s susceptibility to clear pictorial representation. The case he makes for defining a word’s meaning as its use in the language and his concomitant defense of the “blurred concept” help bring into focus Stevens’ nearly concurrent development of a poetics of meaningful unclarity.

This development is worth tracing for its own sake but also inasmuch as it relates to changing attitudes toward interpretive impedance or what modernist critics called and contemporary critics continue to call difficulty. In his 1921 review-essay “The Metaphysical Poets,” T. S. Eliot famously speculated—some would say decreed—that “poets . . . must be *difficult*” so as to force a worn-out language to bear new meanings and to represent the variety and complexity of modern culture (*Selected* 248). Much of what has come to be known as the New Criticism, as it grew up in response to highly allusive and disjunctive modernist poems like “The

Waste Land," sought to defend poetic "difficulty" as a test of its critical acumen. In pursuit of a professional objectivity, however, even the most discerning modernist critics tended to discount as irrelevant to interpretation all matters of affect, including predictable responses to difficulty like bewilderment and frustration. To this day, the New Critical project is credibly characterized as one "designed to make the difficult poetry of the modernists accessible" (Shetley 103). Eliot himself, especially in his later commentary on Milton's visual intractability, betrayed a certain blindness to the use of unclarity as a meaningful poetic device. Like Wittgenstein's philosophy of the 1930s and 1940s, however, Stevens' essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" (1941) and various poems written during or after its composition exemplify an alternative, pragmatic attitude toward unclarity, treating it as potentially meaningful and not just a Gordian nuisance to be sliced through.

## II

For my purposes in this essay, the important shift in perspective and method between Wittgenstein's early and late philosophy can be made most apparent by juxtaposing two brief exemplary quotations. In the *Tractatus*, he had written:

Without philosophy thoughts are, as it were, cloudy and indistinct: its task is to *make* them clear and to *give* them sharp boundaries. (T 4.112; italics mine)<sup>2</sup>

The *Philosophical Investigations* instead emphasizes *seeing* clearly, and Wittgenstein is reluctant therein to circumscribe or otherwise minimize what he takes to be intrinsic blur:

If someone were to draw a sharp boundary I could not acknowledge it as the one that I too always wanted to draw, or had drawn in my mind. For I did not want to draw one at all. (PI §76)

The earlier work treated language as "[t]he totality of propositions," each one a logical "picture of reality" in the sense that its atomic components could be mapped along "lines of projection" onto the structure of the state of affairs it described (T 4.001, 4.01; PI §141). Everyday language was, then, an organically complicated disguise, "from the outward form of [which] it is impossible to infer the form of the thought beneath it" and yet ideally translatable into propositional form (T 4.002). By the time Wittgenstein composed the remarks that make up the *Investigations*, however, he had determined that "the [*Tractatus*'] crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not a *result of investigation*: it was a requirement" (PI §107). His desire for absolute clarity had led him inadvertently to impose it and thus falsify the system's representation of reality. It did not come "of its

own," as Stevens would say; his sharp boundaries were "an obstruction" (CP 310).

Wittgenstein's response was not to cease trying to see the objects of his philosophy clearly, however, but to gain a new, less captivating perspective on them by "turning our whole examination round" (PI §108). He externalized his perspective on the "queer" medium of mental processes, proposing in the early pages of the "Blue Book" (1933–34) that one "replace in these processes any working of the imagination by acts of looking at real objects" (BB 3, 4). Doing so may have guided him toward defining "the meaning of a word [as] its use in the language" by revealing plainly that what gives "life" to a sign, its meaning, could not be another sign or mental image (PI §43; BB 4–5). So, too, Wittgenstein left behind the "ideal" but "slippery ice" of propositional logic in favor of the "rough ground" of everyday language (PI §107). Wishing to "command a clear view of the use of our words" but aware that "[o]ur grammar is lacking in this sort of perspicuity," he surveyed conveniently investigable sections of this linguistic terrain akin to "primitive" languages or, as he more frequently called them, "language-games" (PI §§122, 7). Both of these changes in approach—the externalization of mental processes and focus on everyday language—served an overriding therapeutic duty: to wage "battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of our language," for which seeing philosophical problems clearly ("before the contradiction is resolved") was not only crucial but also sufficient (PI §§109, 125, 133).

In the *Investigations*, his newfound respect for pictorial unclarity becomes patent toward the end of a series of remarks (§§65–78) that seek to disabuse us of what Garth Hallett has called the "Twin Myths [of] Essence and Precision" (140), both of which have relevance to Stevens. Having opened with a series of language-games and hypothetically been challenged to reveal "what is common to all these activities," Wittgenstein flouts the expectation that philosophy will satisfy "our craving for generality" and instead illustrates by example that the various "proceedings that we call 'games' " have no common attribute (PI §65; BB 17; PI §66).<sup>3</sup> Instead, we find "a complicated network of similarities" or "family resemblances" (PI §§66, 67). The integrity and utility of a concept depend not on any one essential attribute being present but on the overlapping of lesser similarities and the consistency of its conventional use in the language—including, importantly, the training of new language users.

This in itself is of revolutionary philosophical import. Wittgenstein thereby closes the door on Platonic and Aristotelian correspondence theories whereby a tree, say, would be definable as such insofar as it partook of some essential quality (tree-ness) or more or less resembled a ghostly paradigm. Wittgenstein presses still further, however. His therapeutic goals motivate him to answer not only the imaginary interlocutor(s) he has employed to voice anticipated skepticism in ordinary language but also the misguided philosophers (including the author of the *Tractatus*) who,

by using language in extraordinary ways, have inadvertently caused confusion. Gottlob Frege, whose “great works” he singled out for recognition in the *Tractatus*, had posited that the definition of a concept must be complete in the sense that, were one to map its range of predication upon a geometric plane, it would be distinctly circumscribed so as to leave no doubt of any given case’s inclusion or exclusion (*T* p. 3; Frege 159). As if adopting the favored vocabulary of a patient, therefore, Wittgenstein turns from urging us to “look and see” that the multifarious uses of a word need not have a common essence to representing this lack and a concept’s potential for innovative use in visual terms (*PI* §66):

One might say that the concept ‘game’ is a concept with blurred edges. —“But is a blurred concept a concept at all?”—Is an indistinct photograph a picture of a person at all? Is it even always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture by a sharp one? Isn’t the indistinct one often exactly what we need? (*PI* §71)

His casually speculative tone and reliance on questions whose affirmative answers are merely implied should not be taken as indicative of this passage’s significance. With the interlocutor’s (quoted) question especially, Wittgenstein grapples with an issue of both philosophical and literary provenance. By Frege’s reckoning, a blurred concept would be no less paradoxical than Milton’s allegory of Death as a shape, “If shape it might be call’d that shape had none / Distinguishable” (*PL* II.667–68). That Wittgenstein discerns and defends what he, too, formerly would have considered injudiciously obscure, if not infernal, is a testament to his later philosophy’s remarkable discipline and flexibility, including the flexibility necessary to accommodate poetic innovation. For we may think of the “blurred edges” as symbolic of a word’s potential for unprecedented yet meaningful use—or, for that matter, of a blackbird’s potential for being looked at in a fourteenth way.<sup>4</sup>

I need briefly to distinguish the two sets of circumstances under which Wittgenstein defends blur in this remark, partly because the distinction is subtle enough to have eluded commentary elsewhere, but also because it informs the organization of my subsequent discussion of Stevens’ reluctance to draw sharp boundaries and his active uses of unclarity. On the one hand, in discerning that concepts are not so much sharply bounded as roughly zoned, Wittgenstein merely reconciles himself to a visual metaphor or picture he had not been willing to accept earlier; he has not *used* the concomitant blur. His emphasis is on our tolerance, not its utility. We are tolerant because we become aware of the blur only when we go to the extraordinary measure of trying to map a concept’s range of possible predication with empirical accuracy.<sup>5</sup> Writing about abstraction, Charles Altieri has made the case that “Wittgenstein and Stevens both elaborate a Modernist imperative whose quest for concreteness as a philosophical tool leads

ultimately to locating an 'indefiniteness' at the core of human experience and then putting it 'correctly and unfalsified, into words' ("Why" 111; *PI* p. 227). The indefiniteness Wittgenstein located at the core of language, however, is one we do not experience under ordinary conditions any more than we necessarily experience doubt in situations where "it is possible for us [merely] to *imagine* a doubt" (*PI* §84). As he points out to his skeptical interlocutor, the lack of a sharp boundary "never troubled you before when you used the word 'game'" (*PI* §68). On the other hand, to suggest, as Wittgenstein does with the quoted remark's latter two questions, that an indistinct photograph or other picture may satisfy a need more effectively than a sharp one is to attribute utility to blur itself. That he does not provide details of what he has in mind may be a matter of his respecting disciplinary boundaries and gives us all the more reason to look elsewhere for pages of illustrations.<sup>6</sup> Dedicated to describing instead of explaining our use of language, Wittgenstein has no incentive to proliferate unclarity. "Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language," he warns; "it can in the end only describe it. . . . It leaves everything as it is" (*PI* §124). This is not true of poetry. The poet actively interferes with the actual use of language, and Stevens eventually chooses to interfere by employing visual figures to promote the appreciation of interpretive impedance.

### III

Not immediately, however. From the beginning of his published career, Stevens, like his seafaring Crispin, sought

to drive away  
The shadow of his fellows from the skies,  
And, from their stale intelligence released,  
To make a new intelligence prevail. . . . (*CP* 37)

We might say with privileged hindsight that even then in *Harmonium* one of Stevens' signatures, blazing through others' umbrae, was itself a kind of shadow: the distinct (or at least distinctive) shade of fluttering things. But in his poetry up to and including much of *Parts of a World*, such static images of persistent movement and other departures from clarity tend to be linked with notions of imperfection and to represent an arguably hedonistic desire for mental stimulation. Although he invokes his muse in "To the One of Fictive Music" as one who "Gives motion to perfection . . . out of our imperfections wrought" and in whose name "an image that is sure" may be apprehended from obscurity, for example, his final stanza eschews perfect resemblance and clarity ("Too near, too clear") in favor of the imagination's gift of the "strange unlike" (*CP* 87, 88). He would have her bestow the systemic play a mind needs to keep itself amused. His case against "brilliant-edged" clarity in favor of "[t]he imperfect" (*CP* 194) in "The Poems of Our Climate" (initially published in 1938) is similar and



deserving of special attention because the introduction of a third factor, complication, smoothes Stevens' transition from unclarity-as-desired-imperfection to unclarity-as-meaningful-difficulty. As Jacqueline Brogan has shown, the poem may be read as a critique of the poetic climate "dominated" at that time by William Carlos Williams' "objective" poetry (76). Here more importantly, it is also Stevens' first explicit instance of what in *Transport to Summer's "Crude Foyer"* he will call "the critique of paradise" (CP 305): a recurring expression of reluctance to be immured (*pairi*, around + *daeza*, wall) or to himself confine and thus sharply define what would otherwise remain unbounded, blurry-edged, in flux.

"The Poems of Our Climate" opens with a meditation on the insufficiency of "complete simplicity" (CP 193). The clarity of water, the brilliance of a porcelain bowl, the purity of newly fallen snow—"one desires / So much more than that" (CP 193), Stevens insists. His very likening of the room's light to "a snowy air" suggests that his mind will not content itself with descriptive minimalism; it ventures outward from the narrowly contained "Pink and white carnations" (CP 193) to imaginative qualifications of the climate that grow more temporally specific as the accommodating simile itself grows in length. Even if such simplicity "Stripped one of all one's torments"—paradise's upside—"one would want more, one would need more" (CP 193–94). For at best such attenuation could merely blind the mind's "I" to its reflective, self-tormenting ("evilly compounded") aspect, and even then it would continue vitally to seek out interesting complications:

There would still remain the never-resting mind,  
So that one would want to escape, come back  
To what had been so long composed.  
The imperfect is our paradise.  
Note that, in this bitterness, delight,  
Since the imperfect is so hot in us,  
Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds. (CP 194)

With the words "escape," "come back," and "so long," Stevens both spatializes and temporalizes the first two sections' focus on simplicity as a retreat to some Edenic and yet wintry First Idea. But no, he contests; the mind will not be held by a "paradise" that, true to that word's etymology, would delimit its curiosity. ("The imperfect [as] paradise" that he envisions for us breaks with connotational prejudices, much as Wittgenstein's remarks on blur undermine previous philosophical assumptions about the availability of a concept [*Begriff*] to a secure mental grasp [*Griff*] modeled on a hand's.) Harold Bloom, whose monograph on Stevens borrows this poem's title for its own, suggests that "'Flawed words' mean all words, the flaw being belatedness" (143). To be sure, Stevens draws us "back" to the complicated present from the prelapsarian. But I would place the em-

phasis instead on the inexact fit between the conceptual generality of many words and the specific referents to which they are applied. Such imperfections provoke the kind of poetic discontent that, for Stevens, promotes poetic activity. They keep words from remaining permanently affixed (as the names Adam gave things in Eden might have remained) and thus perpetually spur him to find “a fresh name” (*OP* 112), as he writes in a late poem, for the eponymous “Local Objects” that, in ways Wittgenstein repeatedly exemplifies in the closing remarks of our focal *Investigations* sequence, may be intimately known yet not securely spoken of (*PI* §§75, 78).

This sense of a poetically generative sequence of “flawed words”—each not so much rejected as displaced or set down and moved on from, their “stubborn sounds” continuing to resonate in the wake—is of a piece with what Brogan describes as “the radical drift between the world and the words through which [the ‘compounded, vital I’] describes the world” (79). But what might seem to be her key insight bearing upon my subject—that “The ‘perfect’ world of Williams’ sharp-edged delineations is not, at least according to Stevens, possible, either in life or in poetry” (79)—although true, somewhat misrepresents the poem’s emphatic if largely speculative concern with conation (“want,” “need”) and its aesthetic fulfillment as “delight.” Here Stevens does not question the possibility of a world of sharp-edged perfection; he simply posits such a world, then finds it wanting.

“The Poems of Our Climate” still partakes of, or at least approvingly defends, the sensuous mode of much of *Harmonium*. It explains why, with his *ice*, Stevens desired a creamier vocabulary of which to whip concupiscent curds; why, among the blackbird’s Zen austerities, he cultivated the hothouse language of *equipage* and *bawds*. The poem marks an important step toward Stevens’ eventual sense of unclarity or complication as crucial to the experience of reading poetry. But its occasion is a far cry from that of others written several years later when, as America’s involvement in World War II prompted Stevens to write poems like “Examination of the Hero in a Time of War,” several nonpolitical events put him in mind of “[t]he fatality of seeing things too well” (*CP* 459) or, at least, the folly of presuming to see them clearly.

#### IV

Stevens tends to address his poetic disclosures of poetic theory to his fellow writers. Published with “Poems of Our Climate” in *Parts of a World*, “Phosphor Reading by His Own Light” advises his fellow readers, and in urging a realist approach to unclarity it nearly replicates the later Wittgenstein’s imperative to ignore one’s expectations and simply observe (“Don’t say: ‘There *must* be . . .’—but *look and see* . . .”) (*PI* §66). The poem marks a return for Stevens to the subject of “The Reader” (*Ideas of Order*), in which he had assumed the first person and blurred the distinction between “reading a book” and “reading as if in a book / Of sombre pages”

(CP 146), where “sombre,” as in the original French, means dark or obscure, not sullen as it has come to mean in English. The former reading goes on “All night” though no lamp burns; the latter becomes a reading of the night, whose “trace of burning stars” (CP 146–47) makes up for a lack of print. When Stevens speaks of “shrivelled forms / Crouched in the moonlight” (CP 147), he again leaves available two possible readings: we are privy to an apocalyptic scene of wretched humans or animals cowering in the cold, or those “forms” are alphabetic characters on the world’s page. What he reads there, or hears as an oneiric voice-over, is a warning expressed in fruitful images:

A voice was mumbling, “Everything  
Falls back to coldness,  
  
Even the musky muscadines,  
The melons, the vermilion pears  
Of the leafless garden.” (CP 147)

In “Phosphor Reading by His Own Light,” Stevens addresses a similar theme maintaining comparable levels of ambiguity and austerity. For “musky” he substitutes “fusky,” the fourth tercet’s ripe sounds are toned down to the more-coolly-luminous-than-vegetable “green,” the alphabet that may or may not have been crouching in the earlier poem becomes explicit, and the first-person perspective of “The Reader” gives way to third-person personification.

It is difficult to read. The page is dark.  
Yet he knows what it is that he expects.

The page is blank or a frame without a glass  
Or a glass that is empty when he looks.

The greenness of night lies on the page and goes  
Down deeply in the empty glass. . . . (CP 267)

Alan Filreis calls Phosphor an “outmoded image of a fiction-maker’s *self-illumination*” (269). As his name suggests, he is a bearer of light; indeed, he projects his expectations and thus blinds himself to the markings on the page before him. Legibility is here a figure for interpretability. Note that Stevens does not say that it is difficult to read *because* Phosphor knows what he expects. I think we must take the poem’s first line at face value and assume that whatever Phosphor has before him is merely difficult, “dark” in the sense of obscure, resistant to interpretation but not blacked out or blank. Otherwise, Stevens’ “Yet” makes no sense. As is, the contrastive conjunction signals Phosphor’s relief at his misguided resourceful-

ness. Instead of letting the difficulty speak to him in its own dark language, he obliterates all nuance with his own light.

But Phosphor is not the only illuminator; night, too, sheds its greenness “on the page and . . . in the empty glass” (CP 267). Stevens’ use of the inclusive conjunction *and*, in lieu of the *or* we would expect on the pattern of the previous sentence’s series of alternatives, calls for explanation. If we take Stevens’ title at its word and thus allow that Phosphor is reading, we might think of each of those alternatives as a reading of the whole that lies before him. Since he cannot read what is on the page, he reads the page itself: it is a blank page, an empty looking-glass frame, a trick mirror. In this, Phosphor has come to bear not only light (*phos*) but the change (*meta*) of metaphor, and these metaphors accrue instead of displacing each other entirely. Phosphor’s reading problem recalls the notion of “gallery fright” that Eliot identified in the conclusion to his Harvard lectures of 1932–33 as one of four major sources of poetic difficulty:

The ordinary reader, when warned against the obscurity of a poem, is apt to be thrown into a state of consternation very unfavorable to poetic receptivity. Instead of beginning, as he should, in a state of sensitivity, he obfuscates his senses by the desire to be clever and to look very hard for something, he doesn’t know what—or else by the desire not to be taken in.  
(*Use* 144)

Whereas Eliot’s anxious reader projects difficulties not inherent to the text, however, Stevens’ allegorical character discounts difficulty and projects himself over the text. Both confuse the roles of poet and reader. As I will show with respect to “The Creations of Sound,” there is reason to suspect that Stevens thought of Eliot as similarly imposing: not the inert catalyst of filiated platinum the author of “Tradition and the Individual Talent” had spoken of, but a more radiant filament.

After the third descriptive distich, Stevens’ speaker turns away from the diorama of Phosphor’s failed narcissism to entreat the reader:

Look, realist, not knowing what you expect.  
The green falls on you as you look,

Falls on and makes and gives, even a speech.  
And you think that that is what you expect,

That elemental parent, the green night,  
Teaching a fussy alphabet. (CP 267)

Here Stevens teaches us how to read, urging us to leave off our personal projections so as to be available to the world’s *données*, and so as to be *in*

that world. If readers accept the role of moon instead of trying to star as the sun, they come to shed reflected light of the same type that illuminates (by reflecting from) the objects they see; this common reflection figures empathic interpretation. Whereas Phosphor *knows*, you (or whoever looks without knowing what he expects) *think*. Although such thinking—the putting aside of certainty’s unilluminating projections—does not free one of all expectation, what one expects conforms with the lyric speaker’s hypothesis: one is reflecting the world’s dark knowledge of itself rather than projecting one’s own. One is being taught a fussy alphabet.

One cannot, I think, overemphasize the importance of this esoteric adjective *fussy*. R. P. Blackmur opens his 1932 review of the expanded second edition of *Harmonium* by noting Stevens’ taste for an apparently “precious,” “finicky” vocabulary (221). He then immediately discredits those who would fault Stevens under the banner of such pejoratives—in a 1925 *Dial* review, Gorham Munson had typified Stevens’ vocabulary as that of a dandy—as well as those who would praise his vocabulary as “ornamental,” and he defends Stevens’ diction by showing that the chosen word is most often the best one (221). He finds, for example, that *funest*, the adjective with which Stevens qualifies certain philosophers in “Of the Manner of Addressing Clouds,” “comes ultimately from the Latin *funus* for funeral,” and thus carries some of the same overtones as those “sustaining poms / Of speech which are like music” (Blackmur 223; *CP* 55). *Fussy* (from the Latin *fuscus*, dark, as in *obfuscate*, to darken, obscure, or confuse) is not just a locally apt qualifier; it imbues the whole poem in which it appears with an illustrative darkness. Readers who do not know what *fussy* means, yet allow their sense of unknowing to speak for itself, are rewarded with a close paraphrase. The word’s sense of the obscure—a sense one gets by breaching its semantic fusk, looking it up—is enhanced by the word’s own obscurity. When “the green night” teaches “a fussy alphabet,” it is not teaching something separate from itself as an elementary school instructor might chalk more or less legible figures on a blackboard. Rather, as a teacher of verbal fusk, the night is in and is sharing its own element. The act is like that of a mother (“parent”) nursing a child, giving of herself, as in the *Harmonium* poem “Palace of the Babies” where “night nursed them [the babies] in its fold” (*CP* 77).

Although it does not yet constitute what I would call a use, Stevens’ appreciation of an unclarity worth reading on its own terms in “Phosphor Reading by His Own Light” goes somewhat beyond Wittgenstein’s recognition and defense of the blur of most concepts. As I have explained, such blur arises in the *Investigations* as a visual counterpart to the absence of a common essence according to which a concept might be defined and to our concomitant reliance on examples when explaining a concept’s meaning or scope. Stevens confronted these same factors in attempting to explain his central concept in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words.” I strongly suspect that it was Stevens’ preparation for this lecture, delivered at

Princeton in May 1941, that led to his realist injunctions concerning the reading of difficulty in “Phosphor Reading by His Own Light” and other, similarly instructive passages about unclarity published later.<sup>7</sup> It transformed his early sense that “one cannot always say a thing clearly and retain the poetry of what one is saying” into a poetics that urged impedance.

As Wittgenstein had sought in his Cambridge lectures of 1934 to present an understanding of *understanding* by considering a series of examples or “natural history” of the word’s use, Stevens seeks in his lecture to present “[t]he history of a figure of speech or the history of an idea” (*Lectures* 97; *NA* 5). As advertised, the figure or idea is that of nobility: the elusive *sine qua non* of genuine poetry, sadly lacking, he thinks, in most contemporary verse, but “sought after” as “one of the inarticulate voices which it is [the poets’] business to overhear and to record” (*NA* 35). This quotation, from the lecture’s second-to-last paragraph, is not a definition but an avowal of the concept’s importance. That importance derives in part from nobility’s resistance to definition, a resistance Stevens wisely allows to manifest itself in a series of examples before he draws attention to it.

Beginning with the *Phaedrus*’s allegory of the human soul as a charioteer trying to manage two ill-matched, winged horses, Stevens presents a chronological series of progressively more realistic and to that degree less noble-seeming renditions of the equestrian in various art forms: the fifteenth-century Florentine sculptor Andrea del Verrocchio’s statue of Bartolomeo Colleoni; Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*; a statue of Andrew Jackson, mounted, near the White House; and a contemporary painting of a colorful anonymous couple astride a carousel’s wooden pony. Inspired by his opening example, Stevens might have followed Socrates in trying to extract from his series some common essence of nobility, what Wittgenstein would refer to hypothetically as “that common thing which I—for some reason—was unable to express” (*PI* §71). Instead, his illustrative approach runs parallel to the more recent philosopher’s rejection of the entrenched assumption that a concept must be definable according to such an essence, that it must be draped upon a skeleton or be circumscribed distinctly. “Here giving examples is not an *indirect* means of explaining—in default of a better” (*PI* §71), Wittgenstein warns. Stevens’ analogous caveat occurs near the end of his lecture. Nobility, he has by then said, is “the peculiarity of the imagination,” a quality inherent to the way the imagination “press[es] back against the pressure of reality” (*NA* 33, 36). Out of this inherent nobility comes another type—“that nobility which is our spiritual height and depth” (*NA* 33–34)—which resists definition. Rather than balking, however, he formalizes this resistance as crucial to what he offers by way of a substitute:

and while I know how difficult it is to express it, nevertheless I am bound to give a sense of it. Nothing could be more evasive and inaccessible. Nothing distorts itself and seeks disguise more

quickly. . . . The manner of it is, in fact, its difficulty, which each man must feel, each day differently, for himself. I am not thinking of the solemn, the portentous or demodé. On the other hand, I am evading a definition. If it is defined, it will be fixed and it must not be fixed. As in the case of an external thing, nobility resolves itself into an enormous number of vibrations, movements, changes. To fix it is to put an end to it. Let me show it to you unfixed. (NA 34)

Crucial here is his election to treat his difficulty as significant and thus foreground it, to identify it as a feature of the expression he seeks. So long as that expression corresponds to a single concept, as here with “nobility,” he remains in the mode analogous to Wittgenstein’s appreciative tolerance of a blur that is an intrinsic feature of ordinary, organically adaptable language. But in locating what he seeks at a double remove reminiscent of the Platonic critique of poetry’s relation to the ideal forms—not in the nobility inherent to the imagination but in a secondary quality that has its source in this first—Stevens anticipates similar secondarinesses in two short didactic poems he would write for *Transport to Summer*: “The Creations of Sound” and “Man Carrying Thing.” Both call for the use of unclarity in poetry and in doing so recall Wittgenstein’s suggestion that an indistinct picture may be “exactly what we need.”

## V

Much attention has been paid to the acoustic privileging implied by Stevens’ assertion in this same lecture that “above everything else, poetry is words; and . . . words, above everything else, are, in poetry, sounds” (NA 32). Critics have tended to overlook his sense of a need for corrective optics (*à la* “Le Monocle . . .”), focusing instead on the way “stubborn sounds” recur and clash (“ . . . de Mon Oncle”) throughout his life’s work. I hope it is by now apparent that Stevens’ unclarity cannot all be attributed thus. The fuskiness Phosphor forfeits is not phonetic. That said, Richard Poirier is certainly right that Stevens, like his fellow “Emersonian pragmatists,” manipulates “the inflected sound of words . . . so as to take the edges off words themselves, to blur and refract them” (*Poetry* 139).<sup>8</sup> In “The Creations of Sound,” Stevens argues that poems—at least those poems that aspire, as he believes they should, to be music—need to foreground such blur as a way of acknowledging the extraordinary degree of freedom they afford sound. As Poirier suggests by describing sound’s vagueness in terms of “blur,” and as Stevens suggests in writing of “The less legible meanings of sounds” (CP 488), visual metaphors are often optimal for conveying the imprecision of sound exactly because we expect greater precision from sight.

“The Creations of Sound” opens as an *ad hominem* argument against an anonymous poet, X. I am inclined to agree with Bloom, for reasons be-

yond those he supplies, that “X” stands for Eliot both in “The Creations of Sound” and, earlier, in “Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas” (151–53):

The lean cats of the arches of the churches  
Bask in the sun in which they feel transparent,  
As if designed by X, the per-noble master.  
They have a sense of their design and savor  
The sunlight. They bear brightly the little beyond  
Themselves, the slightly unjust drawing that is  
Their genius: the exquisite errors of time. (CP 254)

There are hints in this third canto of “Extracts” not only of Eliot’s “old world” exclusiveness and Anglicanism but also of his emphasis in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” on the poet’s pure, impersonal catalysis—in Stevens’ visual metaphor, transparency. These “lean cats” must be stained-glass apostles, but their basking and savoring recall the feline fog and smoke that rubbed against the windowpanes of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” (Stevens’ poem preceded Eliot’s *Old Possum* sequence.) They are decidedly not spontaneous jazz musicians in the modernist American sense of “cats” that would have fit the bill in “The Creations of Sound.”

There Stevens’ gripe is that X is overly willful and designing—unwilling to cede control to a fictive muse:

If the poetry of X was music,  
So that it came to him of its own,  
Without understanding, out of the wall

Or in the ceiling, in sounds not chosen,  
Or chosen quickly, in a freedom  
That was their element, we should not know

That X is an obstruction, a man  
Too exactly himself, and that there are words  
Better without an author, without a poet,

Or having a separate author, a different poet,  
An accretion from ourselves, intelligent  
Beyond intelligence, an artificial man

At a distance, a secondary expositor,  
A being of sound, whom one does not approach  
Through any exaggeration. From him, we collect.  
(CP 310–11)



Stevens presumably did not have access to Robert Frost's letter to John T. Bartlett regarding "the sound of sense," a vernacular music best heard "from voices behind a door that cuts off the words" (80).<sup>9</sup> Given that the poem was first published in the spring of 1944, Eliot's 1943 publication under the musical title *Four Quartets* of four poems that had appeared individually in journals between 1935 ("Burnt Norton") and 1942 ("Little Gidding") seems a likely stimulus. Whoever X is—and it is of course possible that Stevens had no one particular poet in mind—he fails to answer Eliot's call for the "extinction of personality," not by including idiosyncratic emotions in his poetry but by being too much of a person ("a man / Too exactly himself") and expressing too much authority over the sounds of his words (*Selected* 7).

As if already taking to heart the negative lesson learned from X's poetry and thus speaking "At a distance, [as] a secondary expositor," Stevens then strikes up the imperative, relying on third-party readers to relay his chiding:

Tell X that speech is not dirty silence  
Clarified. It is silence made still dirtier.  
It is more than an imitation for the ear.

He lacks this venerable complication.  
His poems are not of the second part of life.  
They do not make the visible a little hard

To see nor, reverberating, eke out the mind  
On peculiar horns, themselves eked out  
By the spontaneous particulars of sound.

We do not say ourselves like that in poems.  
We say ourselves in syllables that rise  
From the floor, rising in speech we do not speak.

(CP 311)

Note that in the first of these last four tercets Stevens writes about sound and its absence ("speech," "silence") in visual terms ("dirty," "clarified"). The corollary call for complication and the embedded poetic dictum "[M]ake the visible a little hard / To see" may seem hypocritical from one who has just taken X to task for obstruction. But there is no contradiction. Stevens implicitly distinguishes, as Wittgenstein would explicitly distinguish, between inadvertent distortions that arise despite ostensible transparency—as when sunlight passes through each "slightly unjust drawing" in "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas" or when "the crystalline purity of logic" is imposed upon ordinary language in the *Tractatus*—and those more honest, because unmistakably out-of-focus,

ekings that are made (consciously if not intentionally) "a little hard to see." The former unclarity and resulting interpretive difficulties deny their authorship and thus persist as "the exquisite errors of time"; the latter make conspicuous their source in the authorial yielding of creative autonomy to sound.

Eliot had disparaged Milton's "auditory imagination" exactly because it made the visible a little hard to see, and for the reasons Stevens celebrates: because he saw Milton giving the aural aspects of language free rein (or should one here say "reign"?) over sense. In an essay first published in 1936, Eliot juxtaposes passages from Milton and Henry James. Whereas James's syntactical convolutions are "necessary," arising from his "determination not to simplify, and in that simplification lose any of the real intricacies and by-paths of mental movement," Eliot claims that "the complication of a Miltonic sentence is an active complication, a complication deliberately introduced into what was a previously simplified and abstract thought" (*On Poetry* 142). The syntax of *Paradise Lost*, Eliot complains, "is determined by the musical significance . . . rather than by the attempt to follow actual speech or thought" (142). "Follow" is perhaps the key word here; to give sound its due, Stevens would lead or probe with it or, as he writes, devise a second-order "being of sound" to do so.

If "make the visible a little hard to see" is Stevens' response to an Eliotic *X*'s false transparencies and misguided clarifications, then the sentence with which "Man Carrying Thing" begins—"The poem must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully" (*CP* 350)—answers Eliot's dictum regarding poetic difficulty. B. J. Leggett traces the poem's genealogy to an illustrative caveat regarding the commentary Stevens had sent and would continue to send to Hi Simons throughout the first eight months of 1940, and to his reading of Charles Mauron's *Aesthetics and Psychology* nearly a year later in preparation for his "Noble Rider" lecture. In the latter, Stevens apparently recognized his own thoughts reflected with a certain alienated majesty. Mauron argued that the poet—or, as he says, the artist—speaks for the pleasure of speaking, without really aiming at being understood, and that for the reader in the properly detached mental state "the absence of immediate understanding is a desirable condition" (Leggett 55).

As we have seen, Stevens went on to suggest something similar in the first tercet of "The Creations of Sound": poetry aspiring to the condition of music should come "of its own, / Without understanding." In that poem, he betrayed no desire for an eventual resolution of the recommended unclarity, however. In "Man Carrying Thing," Mauron's qualification of understanding's desirable absence as temporary comes into play. "Almost," although it corresponds to "a little," as "resist" corresponds to "hard" and "the intelligence" to "the visible," demands a more substantial response. As in "Phosphor Reading by His Own Light," the poem turns toward its readers, telling us what we must do to help effect the "Almost" by overcoming the resistance. I address "Man Carrying Thing" as my culminat-

ing example because, in figuring the intellectual apprehension of a poem in visual terms, and insisting that this should be neither immediate nor impossible, it represents Stevens' most insistent plea for the association of unclarity and interpretive impedance and for their appreciation as crucial to the desired relationship a reader has with a poem: not an important stage on the way toward understanding but the end itself.

Commenting on *Ideas of Order's* "Gray Stones and Gray Pigeons," Stevens had told Hi Simons that "the poem is precisely what is printed on the page," but it soon struck him that this could not account for the pleasures of what he would later call, in his "Reply to Papini," "our gradual possession" (L 347–48; CP 447). Eleven days later, he offered an alternative:

a poem is like a man walking on the bank of a river, whose shadow is reflected in the water. If you explain a poem, you are quite likely to do it either in terms of the man or in terms of the shadow, but you have to explain it in terms of the whole. (L 354)

This again did not suffice for reasons one may surmise. The relationship between the indisputably identifiable, physical aspects of a poem—the particular words in a particular order—and what a reader might see in them will often be less obvious than even a ripple-distorted reflection suggests. As Altieri has argued with reference to late Wittgenstein, "approaches to questions of meaning depend not on *lines of projection*"—which in Stevens' example would map each element of the distorted reflection in a visually coherent way onto its original—"but rather on *methods of projection*" (Act 24; PI §§139, 141).

For his "Illustration" of the proposition with which "Man Carrying Thing" opens, Stevens presents yet another scenario. The "Man" of the title "resists / Identity" as "A brune figure in winter evening" (CP 350). "The thing he carries," corresponding to the reflected shadow, "resists / The most necessitous sense" (CP 350), which I take to be the "intelligence" of line 1 figured yet again as sight—"necessitous" in the sense of unceasing (*ne cessare*), as in "the never-resting mind" (CP 194) of "The Poems of Our Climate." With the kind of misleading enjambment that John Hollander treats as a characteristically Miltonic device "for choreographing the reader's attention" (96), Stevens then proposes a method of response:

Accept them, then,  
As secondary (parts not quite perceived  
  
Of the obvious whole, uncertain particles  
Of the certain solid, the primary free from doubt,  
  
Things floating like the first hundred flakes of snow  
Out of a storm we must endure all night,

Out of a storm of secondary things),  
A horror of thoughts that suddenly are real.

We must endure our thoughts all night, until  
The bright obvious stands motionless in cold.  
(CP 350–51)

Alone, the imperative phrase “Accept them, then” suggests a solace. Upon turning, the phrase enters one of Stevens’ “intricate evasions of as” (CP 486) that leads away from the usual comforts of acceptance into a swirling parenthesis wherein the man and thing, themselves figures in an illustration of poetic apprehension, are secondarily figured as a storm’s miniscule constituents.

Like Wittgenstein, who declined to report directly on mental processes and urged us “not to think of understanding as a ‘mental process’ at all” (§154), Stevens neither tells nor shows us how his secondary “parts not quite perceived” coalesce to become brightly obvious. Instead, he provides, by means of both imagery and syntax, a sense of what temporarily successful resistance and the triumph of the intelligence each look like. The mind, figured as the climate of the poem’s snowstorm in which perceptual cognitive flakes float and presumably accrue, is put on active hold. What “we” mindful, would-be beholders are depended upon to provide is endurance. The verb “endure”—the poem’s emotional center, about which the parenthetical storm drifts, and the feeling of which the parenthesis begins to convey with its discursive length—derives not, as one might expect, from the Latin *durare*, to last, but from *indurare*, to make hard in the sense of solid.<sup>10</sup> For us to “endure our thoughts all night” may involve more than our waiting out the storm or the earth’s diurnal turning. Implicitly, we are involved in a kind of packing, perhaps after a series of experimental rearrangements, of those “parts not quite perceived” and “uncertain particles” into a “certain solid.” In a sense, we must make hard the little visible (so as) to see.

I have focused my attention throughout this essay on Stevens’ prescriptions for blur—that is, on what he *says* in several short didactic poems and an essay regarding the meaningful use and appreciation of unclarity—rather than showing how he taps the implicative potential of such blur. In “Man Carrying Thing,” however, he marries practice with theory. We can now look back a couple of decades to the time of his epistolary acknowledgment of unclarity’s poetic virtues to see that Stevens has engaged his readers in such orreries of circulating images and epicyclical syntax since *Harmonium*. For all the insightful interpretations “The Snow Man” has garnered, little heed has been paid to the significance of its being a single sentence. As its fifteen lines unfold, readers have to defer interpretive closure of any given phrase until the end of the poem. We are forced to contain the full flux of its many possible parsings before we can safely begin

the process of interpretive resolution. We are prompted to push on, to take in a flurry of uncertain particles, until we become, as it were, sympathetic snowmen. Emptied even of self-awareness as the sifting of syntactical complexities displaces all competing cognition, we temporarily lose our capacity to imagine (“behold[ing] / Nothing that is not there”) and experience the resulting void (“the nothing that is”) (CP 10). Only with analytical hindsight can we appreciate the appropriateness of this imaginative dearth and experience, but if and when that appreciation takes hold, we behold something we could not have grasped otherwise.

## VI

In a brilliant essay entitled “Stevens without Epistemology,” Gerald Bruns has identified many obstacles to reading Stevens’ language as a social practice, which is to say in accordance with Wittgenstein’s eventual sense of language.<sup>11</sup> Writing “from the standpoint made available by the hermeneutical turn in human thinking”—that is, with a sense that understanding is historically contingent and dialogical rather than a matter of correspondence between the mind and reality—Brunns draws upon several of the same poems I have addressed to demonstrate that Stevens characteristically “appropriat[es] the voice of the other by a discourse of the self that is in turn characterized as a monologue or song of world-making” (25, 28). One of his several ways of effectively silencing any alien voice that might make itself heard in his work is “by converting such sound into an ideal form that cannot be comprehended except by visual analogies” (28). Indeed, one could get the impression from Bruns’s account that Stevens uses unclarity mainly in the conversion of speech into something unvoiced, without “say.” But we have now seen several instances of Stevens’ answering poems that avail themselves to such an account—“The Reader,” “The Creations of Sound”—with others equally concerned with unclarity—“Phosphor Reading by His Own Light,” “Man Carrying Thing”—in which no alien voices, indeed no spoken-of sounds at all, call out to be squelched.

What I hope I have shown is that Stevens’ disinclination to record any articulate voices he may have overheard in the world or in the corridors of his mind (in which, as Bruns reminds us, “the voice [of thought] is always that of someone else” [OP 168]) has a positive flip side. Jules David Law has shown that Wittgenstein, especially in the notes edited as *On Certainty*, made a space in philosophy and literary studies for the recognition that “challenges to our habitual ways of thinking [are not all] ‘simply’ accommodated or rejected” (334). Many of Stevens’ poems, by impeding our ability to interpret them and yet eventually yielding a coherent image or understanding, similarly acquaint us with that important middle ground, “the region of what it is *difficult to imagine*” (Law 325). We are made to feel what we might otherwise fail to imagine and to see as blur what we might otherwise fail to conceive or come to terms with. What we have difficulty

seeing or imagining will often be a visual analogue of one of those “inarticulate voices” that Stevens claims “it is [the poet’s] business to overhear and to record” (NA 35). To be sure, these are the voices not of the subaltern but of nobility and abstractions yet more shadowy and fleeting. They are nevertheless so worthy to be heard that Stevensian heirs like John Ashbery and John Koethe have continued the project of giving them voice into the twenty-first century.

Stevens’ commitment to epistemology and the imagination no doubt marks a departure from the parallels with Wittgenstein that I have been tracing, but both the philosophical poet and the poetic philosopher sought to accord unclarity a degree of respect to the end. In a 1948 remark included in *Culture and Value*, Wittgenstein admits,

it is . . . enormously difficult to discern [one’s own] limitations, i.e. to depict them clearly. Or, as one might say, to invent a style of painting capable of depicting what is, in this way, fuzzy [Unklare]. For I want to keep telling myself: “Make sure you really do paint only what you see!” (68e)

How, he may as well be asking, does one depict something indistinct so that another viewer may recognize the depiction as accurate and not a poor reproduction of a more distinctly delineated original? It will not do for a painter ostensibly copying a blurred photograph, say, to sharpen the constituent forms and then claim that the painting is therefore a more accurate copy. Stevens, who had encountered analogous claims by literary critics, seems to have repeatedly pondered a similar question regarding poetic unclarity: how does one prompt readers to recognize it as an intentional, meaningful attribute and not the mark of incompetent artistry? How does one get credit for Negative Capability instead of coming off as incapable? His answer was to supplement the one kind of poem with others that explicitly urge readers to respect the unclarity and concomitant interpretive impedance of the first and, beyond that, to simply persist in his appreciation of blur.

The same year, 1948, finds Stevens defying Giovanni Papini’s advice “To the Poets” to “Cease, then, from being the astute calligraphers of congealed daydreams, the hunters of cerebral phosphorescences” (L 609; CP 446). How apt that for the epigraph of a poem in which he rejects Eliot’s “speak[ing] in ruins” and consolatory shoring in favor of “shar[ing] the confusions of intelligence” (CP 446), he also rejects the recently available English translation of Papini’s fictional Italian *Lettere*. Although Stevens’ eschewal of the translator’s “frozen visions” and “intellectual brilliance” so as to recast his own “congealed daydreams” and hunt his own “cerebral phosphorescences” may readily be construed as one more instance of his repression of an other’s voice, the silencing is importantly committed in the service of calligraphy, a mode of writing that increases the visibility of what the two-

part poem's second half calls "[t]he intricacies of appearance" in part by impeding the efficient communication of a narrowly construed "sense" (Papini 123; *CP* 447). Like the "venerable complication" of euphony, such calligraphic unclarity can be, and in Stevens' poetry often is, what alerts readers to the availability of a "satisfaction underneath the sense, / The conception sparking in still obstinate thought" (*CP* 448). Stevens' own interest in discerning limitations seldom prompted him to depict only what he saw or to repeat only what he heard. Instead, he repeatedly sought to demonstrate what we miss if we mistake our own light, our critical sharpness, and the efficient attainment of clarity for the full picture.<sup>12</sup>

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Citations of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* correspond to decimal proposition numbers unless, as here, a page number is explicitly indicated (p.). Part I of *Philosophical Investigations* is cited by section number (§); part II and all other Wittgensteinian editions by page number.

<sup>2</sup> In all subsequent quotations, italics represent the original author's emphases.

<sup>3</sup> That Wittgenstein chooses "games" as his exemplary concept in §§66–71 and §75 is merely incidental to the ongoing defense of "language-games." He could have selected almost any other concept. See *BB* 19 for a similar argument regarding various cases of wishing.

<sup>4</sup> See *PI* §74 for Wittgenstein's commentary on the relationship between "seeing-as" and use.

<sup>5</sup> To become aware that words have multiple uses is not to become aware of a concept's lack of a sharp boundary. For even if concepts were distinctly circumscribed, these multiple uses would coexist within the bounds.

<sup>6</sup> The speculations of commentators have been limited and bizarre. Hallett imagines that the philosopher has in mind something like the intentionally vague "background montages" of jewelry advertisements (152). Lugg speculates that a blurred mug shot "that leaves some of [the criminal's] features obscure may serve its purpose better than a more detailed sketch" (126). Bloor suggests that "we should equate Wittgenstein's 'needs' with social interests," the particular identification of which would take him beyond the usual bounds of philosophy into empirical investigation (48–49).

<sup>7</sup> Stevens indicates in his letter to Henry Church of 30 January 1941 that, although he has secured his title, the body of his lecture "will take a good deal of thinking and a good deal of reading," let alone writing, to produce; he hoped to "find the time to do a first draft during February" (*L* 386). According to Edelman's bibliography, the *Reader's Guide to Periodicals*, and *Granger's Index*, Stevens did not publish "Phosphor Reading by His Own Light" in a journal prior to its inclusion in *New Poems: An Anthology of British and American Poetry* (April 1942) and *Parts of a World* (September 1942). Nor do the *Letters* mention the poem. With the notable (and confusing) exception of the placement of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" at the end of *Transport to Summer*, however, the poems in Stevens' collections tend to be ordered chronologically. "Montrachet-le-Jardin" and "The News of the Weather," the journal-published poems that most immediately precede "Phosphor Reading by His Own Light" in *Parts of a World*, appeared in January–February 1942 (*Partisan Review*) and Summer 1941 (*Accent*), respectively.

Even accounting for delays between writing, submission, and publication, it seems likely that these poems were written near the time of Stevens' lecture preparation and that "Phosphor Reading by His Own Light" was written then, too, or soon after.

<sup>8</sup>See also *The Renewal of Literature*, where Poirier has been especially alert to distinctions between characteristically Stevensian modes of what I have preferred to call interpretive impedance and those highly allusive and disjunctive modes to which Stevens may have been referring with his "épater les savants" quip in the letter quoted at the beginning of this essay.

<sup>9</sup>Frost's letter describing "the sound of sense" is dated 4 July 1913; his correspondence was not published until 1964, however.

<sup>10</sup>The distinction between the words' Indo-European roots is more dramatic. The etymological appendix of the *American Heritage Dictionary* traces the *dur-* of *duration* to *deue-/ dwae-* (temporally long), that of *endure* to *deru-/ dreu-* (to be firm, solid, steadfast) as in *tree*, or, as Stevens writes, "true." The two Latin verbs are, of course, closely related. What has been made hard in the sense of a physical solid is less susceptible to erosion, more likely to last; so, too, what has been made hard in the sense of difficult, retains its secrecies longer.

<sup>11</sup>Schatzki distinguishes Wittgenstein's later notion that "language is essentially a form of social behaviour" from his Tractarian treatment of it as "a special medium which perhaps, in virtue of its logical properties, possessed an intimate relation to the structure of the world" (127–28). Even Wittgensteinian language-games are not as explicitly social as the dialogic language to which Bruns refers, however. As Bérubé has observed, "though Bakhtin and Wittgenstein both depict a world filled with competing idiolects and dialects, the difference between Bakhtinian 'socio-linguistic points of view' and Wittgenstein's 'to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life' . . . is that the former must be *heard* directly in order to be imagined: 'It is impossible to represent an alien ideological world adequately without first permitting it to sound' " (84). This distinction helps explain why Bruns sets the later Wittgenstein off to the side and looks to Heidegger and Bakhtin as his hermeneutic exemplars.

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# The Structural Modes of Wallace Stevens' "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words"

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## INTRODUCTION

WALLACE STEVENS' "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" has been repeatedly mined for his views of poetry, the imagination, and reality. The lecture is, according to Milton Bates, "at once his most ambitious and most satisfactory attempt to define the nature of poetry and the spiritual role of the poet" (198). This, indeed, is his ostensible purpose. Yet, Joan Richardson indicates there is a problem in discerning its principle of organization. The lecture is made of "a compendium of references to the texts that had touched him most in the last ten years [the 1930s]; it was at the same time a lecture so 'illogically complicate[d]' . . . that it evaded and evades any definition" (180). To find the logic in Stevens' overall organization, it is necessary to obtain a perspective that stands back from its attractive central ideas and its multiple references.

In 1939, in letters between himself and Henry Church, a wealthy American, who was editor of the French magazine *Mesures*, Stevens suggested that Church establish "a chair [of poetry at Harvard] for the study of the history of poetic thought and of the theory of poetry" (L 358). Stevens did not put himself forward for this chair, but when he was invited to speak in a series of four lectures on poetry, sponsored by Church, at Princeton University, his earlier combination of poetic history and poetic theory informed his first lecture, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," which he presented at Princeton University on May 8, 1941.<sup>1</sup> His letters show that he approached writing the lecture as he would a poem. His poetic practice had been to read parts of a book in philosophy or aesthetics and to extract some proposition that interested him to be used for thinking through an aesthetic problem in terms of his daily experience and for expressing in words his "thoughts and feelings" (NA 32). The sentence chosen gave him direction for writing a poem during, for example, his walk to his office at the insurance company. A remark about the conflict of current history and the imagination particularly germane to his lecture occurs in a letter of June 16, 1941, just five weeks after the Princeton talk:

I like to read a little philosophy after breakfast, before starting downtown. In a little, secondhand book on Hegel I found the following this morning:

"If all the world was to be conceived as poetic . . . our poetry must find room for much which, to the immediate eye of the imagination is unpoetic . . . Unreason itself must find a place . . . In such a theory optimism must be reached not by the exclusion but by the exhaustion of pessimism." (L 390–91)

In a letter of January 9, 1941, to Church, he mentions an essay he is reading at the time. "The other day, in the SOUTHERN REVIEW, I think, I saw an article by Leo Spitzer[;] . . . as a source he might be of interest" (L 384). Without mentioning Spitzer's essay, "History of Ideas Versus Reading of Poetry," Stevens makes use of it in several ways in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," the primary one being to think about his own paper as a study in the "history of ideas," and three weeks later, on January 30, 1941, he wrote to Church, "Very likely, I have all the information that I need now respecting the lecture. . . . The subject of my paper will be THE NOBLE RIDER AND THE SOUND OF WORDS. *It will trace the idea of nobility through what may be called the disaster of reality, and particularly the reality of words.* This sounds rather stupid; it will take a good deal of thinking and a good deal of reading, but, as I see the thing now, it is a subject worth all that" (L 386; emphasis added). His lecture topic is the history of the idea of nobility in the figure of the "noble rider" and in the function of words.

Stevens' interests in "the history of poetic thought and of the theory of poetry" inform the organization and therefore the structure of the lecture—along with his strong moral motivation as implied in his phrase "the disaster of reality." To my knowledge, the Hegel book, mentioned earlier, has not been found, but he could have been reading the same book when preparing for his lecture. If so, it is likely he also read there a quotation from Hegel's "Inaugural Address," which is found at the beginning of Hegel's *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, for it, too, is close to his argument regarding the pressure of "reality":

The necessities of the time have accorded to the petty interests of everyday life such overwhelming attention: the deep interests of actuality and the strife respecting these have engrossed all the powers and the forces of the mind—as also the necessary means—to so great an extent, that no place has been left to the higher inward life, the intellectual operations of a purer sort; and the better natures have thus been stunted in their growth, and in great measure sacrificed. (xli)

Hegel's "deep interests of actuality and the strife respecting these [that] have engrossed all the powers and the forces of the mind" can easily be transposed into Stevens' "reality" and the "imagination" and, therefore, into how energy and the force of nobility are needed to protect "the inward life" necessary to write poems. This passage from Hegel suggests the struggles Stevens felt he needed to confront.

Anxious about his lecture, Stevens gathered his books and journals on philosophy, the history of the English language, and poetics, which he might have owned in relation to writing poems. He piled high his volumes: "Everything is going well with my paper," he wrote to Church. "I shall have to eliminate a great deal of the reading. The truth is that, if you want to work your way through your library, the simplest way to go about it is to have a definite subject and then to look for something pertinent to it. I find something pertinent everywhere; I must have two or three dozen books on my table that I had never looked at before" (L 388). Some of his books, including several of history and theory, are mentioned in the lecture or are listed by Richardson: Plato's *Phaedrus*; Cervantes' *Don Quixote*; H. P. Adams' *The Life and Writings of Giambattista Vico*; F. W. Bateson's *English Poetry and the English Language: An Experiment in Literary History*; G. G. Coulton's *Europe's Apprenticeship: A Survey of Medieval Latin*; I. A. Richards' *Coleridge of the Imagination*; Wordsworth's preface to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*; and Croce's *Defense of Poetry*; among others (Richardson 170–71). Each book indicates his approach to the structure and logic of his lecture. Spitzer's title, "History of Ideas Versus the Reading of Poetry," may have suggested the two elements of Stevens' title. Other influences on his writing may be established, but emphasis here is only on the organization of the lecture apart from his collateral readings.

#### PARADIGMS

Milton Bates indicates a logical agenda, in that Stevens arranged this aggregate as "episodes" in a historical sequence:

He opens his lecture with an experiment in reading, choosing for his text Plato's description of the soul as a charioteer drawn across the heavens by a pair of winged horses, one of noble, the other of ignoble breed. . . . Plato's parable is the first of five "episodes" which Stevens uses to sketch the history of imaginative representation. (198)

This attention to historical sequence shows that Richardson's "compendium of references . . . 'illogically complicate[d],' " which suggests the lecture is merely an aggregate, a random collection of "texts that had touched him most in the last ten years," is inadequate. At first glance, this sequence appears with no special logic other than that of using several instances of figures on horseback dating from Verrocchio's *Bartolommeo Colleoni* to

Reginald Marsh's *Wooden Horses* and of superficial chronology. However, as indicated before in the quotation from Hegel's "Inaugural Address," there is a direction to the chronology. As Bates observes:

Especially since the crash of 1929, Stevens contends, reality has exerted progressively more pressure upon the human spirit. The war then being fought in Europe was but one part of a "war-like whole" whose other parts included the assault on authority, anti-intellectualism, loss of religious faith, violations of privacy, lack of pride in one's work, and even—here Stevens airs one of his pet peeves—the affront of an income tax. The modern sensibility is inevitably shaped by this pressure and can no longer yield itself to works of art in which the noble or imaginative element predominates; hence the history of poetry, like that of other arts, is a "cemetery of nobilities." (199)

Clearly, a sign of its logic is its pattern of cultural decline. Many variants from Hesiod to Spengler of such historical patterns of decline or cycles in literature, religion, and philosophy have been reduced and schematized by Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism*. Frye's historical pattern in his first essay, "Historical Criticism: Theory of Modes," and his construction of the phases of language in his second essay, "Ethical Criticism: Theory of Symbols," are extraordinarily close to Stevens' organization and thus can be useful for highlighting the lecture's structure and logic.

"The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" has a prefatory section followed by five numbered sections. The preface uses a mythic anecdote, quoting Plato's fable in *Phaedrus* about the soul as a charioteer drawn by two winged horses, in what Bates calls an "experiment in reading" (198). Section 1 explains that the horse-and-rider figure forms an iconographic motif in artworks, which may be studied for their ratios of those difficult concepts "imagination" and "reality" and aesthetic "belief" and "disbelief." Section 2 offers several illustrations of the motif from literature, sculpture, and painting produced over three hundred and fifty years. Section 3 begins where the illustrations end, emphasizing the decay of language and art in the twentieth century. Section 4 constructs a figure of an ideal "possible poet." And Section 5 describes poetry's beneficent powers for society. Each section expresses its own central emotion, and the structure of the lecture includes the ordering of these emotions. As the passage from *Phaedrus* provides the main figure of the soul, some of the categories, and the overall direction of the lecture, it is useful to quote the paragraph.

*Let our figure be of a composite nature—a pair of winged horses and a charioteer. Now the winged horses and the charioteer of the gods are all of them noble, and of noble breed, while ours are mixed;*

*and we have a charioteer who drives them in a pair, and one of them is noble and of noble origin, and the other is ignoble and of ignoble origin; and, as might be expected, there is a great deal of trouble in managing them. I will endeavor to explain to you in what way the mortal differs from the immortal creature. The soul or animate being has the care of the inanimate, and traverses the whole heaven in divers forms appearing;—when perfect and fully winged she soars upward, and is the ruler of the universe; while the imperfect soul loses her feathers, and drooping in her flight at last settles on the solid ground. (NA 3)*

This structure influenced many poems in Stevens' complete works. For example, its soul, chariot, flight, feathers, noble (swan), and ignoble (crow) are used in "Invective Against Swans," a poem in *Harmonium* that recalls Plato:

The soul, O ganders, flies beyond the parks  
And far beyond the discords of the wind[,]  
.....  
Bequeathing your white feathers to the moon. . . .

Behold, already on the long parades  
The crows anoint the statues with their dirt.

And the soul, O ganders, being lonely, flies  
Beyond your chilly chariots, to the skies. (CP 4)

This poem of loneliness and deprivation while flying high is an "invective" against the temptations of the conventional images of swans, who are deflated as "ganders" or "geese."

Northrop Frye begins the first essay, "Historical Criticism: Theory of Modes," with reference to Aristotle's *Poetics*. His translation of Aristotle's terms of "good" and "bad" as "weighty" and "light" and his reference to the hero produce structures similar to Plato's charioteer pulled by two horses and in two directions, ascending and descending:

In the second paragraph of the *Poetics* Aristotle speaks of the differences in works of fiction which are caused by the different elevations of the characters in them. In some fictions, he says, the characters are better than we are, in others worse, in still others on the same level. . . . Aristotle's words for good and bad, however, are *spoudaios* and *phaulos*, which have a figurative sense of weighty and light. In literary fictions the plot consists of somebody doing something. The somebody, if an individual, is the hero, and the something he does or fails to do is what he can do, or could have done, on the level of the pos-

tulates made about him by the author and the consequent expectations of the audience. Fictions, therefore, may be classified, not morally, but by the hero's power of action, which may be greater than ours, less, or roughly the same. (33)

Similarities of Stevens' quotation of Plato to Frye's adaptation of Aristotle result in the correspondences, important and explanatory, between "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" and Frye's first essay on historical criticism. From the initial structure of directions, both Stevens and Frye construct a descension and an ascension, establishing a scale or ladder. Stevens retains a hierarchy of values and Frye seeks to bypass that hierarchizing. Both focus on a central hero—Stevens, as will be seen later, on the fiction of a "possible poet"; Frye on the characters in fictions. Before juxtaposing the two texts in detail, it is necessary to describe Frye's idea and his taxonomy of the "mode."

#### THE CONCEPT OF "MODE"

Frye continues his interpretation of Aristotle by noting, "Fictions, therefore, may be classified . . . by the hero's power of action, which may be greater than ours, less, or roughly the same" (33). A "fictional mode" covers the range of a "hero's power of action." Frye proposes five degrees of power and assigns each rank of power a term to indicate the range of its mode: the hero's powers of action are "mythological" or "divine"; "romantic"; "high mimetic"; "low mimetic"; and "ironic." An analogy of this ranking of the hero's powers is found in literary history. For example, "In the pre-medieval period literature is closely attached to Christian, late Classical, Celtic, or Teutonic *myths*. . . . *Romance* divides into two main forms: a secular form dealing with chivalry and knight-errantry, and a religious form devoted to legends of saints" (34; emphasis added). A "historical mode" characterizes the "power of action" across a cultural period. All the modes are further described in the next section.

After ranking the hero's powers and labeling cultural periods, Frye proposes another analogy: "But besides the internal fiction of the hero and his society, there is an external fiction which is a relation between the writer and the writer's society" (52). Frye calls such fictions "thematic modes," and they categorize writers' "attitudes" as divine "oracle" and "visionary," or romantic "memory," and so on. In the Glossary, Frye concisely defines the term "mode" as "A conventional power of action assumed about the chief characters in fictional literature, or the corresponding attitude assumed by the poet toward his audience in thematic literature. Such modes tend to succeed one another in a historical sequence" (366). As Stevens describes the changing conditions of art and poetic language over the centuries, his own relationship to these materials and to his audience changes in parallel to Frye's sequence of thematic fictions.

FIRST CATABASIS:  
SECTION 1 AND MODAL CORRESPONDENCES IN SECTION 2

The introductory section and Sections 1 and 2 of Stevens' essay are related only to the first half of the title, the idea and figure of "the noble rider." In Section 1, Stevens places the "souls" of poets and readers in "chariots" drawn by the dialectic of several opposites: of noble and ignoble powers, of strong and weary wills, and of the "imagination" and "reality." Poets and readers work together when the poet's "imagination" is supported by the readers' belief; contrarily, readers' disbelief favors mainly "realism" in its literature. Stevens' polarities and ratios of the mixtures of "imagination" and "reality" expand to ideas of poetic freedom and limiting social demands.

In Section 2, Stevens' five examples of "noble riders" yield a spiritual view of Western culture: adding to Plato's myth given in the preface are Cervantes' novel of *Don Quixote*, Verrocchio's statue of Colleoni, Clark Wills's statue of Andrew Jackson, and Reginald Marsh's painting *Wooden Horses*. His five examples are from different historical periods and fit within Frye's five historical modes:

1. *Divine or mythic mode*. Stevens says, "We recognize at once, in this figure [of the soul, two horses, and chariot], Plato's pure poetry; and at the same time we recognize what Coleridge called Plato's dear, gorgeous nonsense. . . . Why does this figure, potent for so long, become merely the emblem of a mythology . . .?" (NA 3-4). Frye writes, "If superior in *kind* both to other men and to the environment of other men, the hero is a divine being, and the story about him will be a *myth* in the common sense of a story about a god" (33). In Stevens' essay, it is a myth of the high flying soul. The descent from the "pure poetry" of the mythic level to a mere "emblem of a mythology" occurs because of the cultural differences generated over centuries of history and in the knowledge of the readers: "Then suddenly we remember . . . that the soul no longer exists and we droop in our flight and at last settle on the solid ground. The figure becomes antiquated and rustic" (NA 4). Stevens holds Plato's myth as his primary example and then blends the aesthetic responses of readers with the differences occurring in the historical process. In his strictly formalist analysis, Frye notes the changes without introducing historical or aesthetic questions.

2. *Romantic mode*. After Plato, Stevens refers to Cervantes, and, of course, many features of *Don Quixote* are revisions of an earlier romanticism in Stevens' own romance. The character Don Quixote internalizes the marvels of romance heroes in his illusions of himself as a romantic hero in an enchanted, constantly transforming world. "If superior in *degree* to other men and to his environment, the hero is the typical hero of *romance*, whose actions are marvellous but who is himself identified as a human being. The hero of romance moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of na-



ture are slightly suspended" (33). Stevens, like Frye, points out that the descent from the divine to the earth is a drop in *kind*. He observes, "It would be like a return from what Plato calls 'the back of heaven' to one's own spot" (NA 8).

3. *High mimetic mode*. "If superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment, the hero is a leader. . . . This is the hero of the *high mimetic mode*, of most epic and tragedy" (33–34). Stevens hurries from Quixote to Verrocchio's statue of Colleoni, in Venice: "I have selected him because there, on the edge of the world in which we live today, he established a form of such nobility that it has never ceased to magnify us in our own eyes. . . . What man on whose side the horseman fought could ever be anything but fearless, anything but indomitable" (NA 8). (In 1941, describing such military leadership might have been heard as rousing oratory.) Later, he refers to Colleoni as "imperial" (NA 10).

4. *Low mimetic mode*. "One looks at this work [the statue of Andrew Jackson] of Clark Mills and thinks of the remark of Bertrand Russell that to acquire immunity to eloquence is of the utmost importance to the citizens of a democracy. . . . This work is a work of fancy. . . . Fancy is an activity of the mind which puts things together of choice, *not* the will . . . Fancy, then, is an exercise of selection from among objects already supplied by association, a selection made for purposes which are not then and therein being shaped but have been already fixed" (NA 10–11). Citizens in a democracy exercising low mimetic fancy choose objects from the ordinary world. Frye writes, "If superior neither to other men nor to his environment, the hero is one of us: we respond to a sense of his common humanity, and demand from the poet the same canons of probability that we find in our own experience. This gives us the hero of the *low mimetic mode*, of most comedy and of realistic fiction" (34).

5. *Ironic mode*. Stevens describes Marsh's *Wooden Horses* carefully and emphasizes that it is "a picture of ribald and hilarious reality" (NA 12), which is consistent with Frye's comedy and realistic fiction, suggesting the low mimetic mode. This painting's fun is on a "merry-go-round," with the man trying "to keep his cigar out of the girl's hair. . . . [The girl] has the legs of a hammer-thrower"; "It seems that it would be better if someone were to hold her on her horse" (NA 12). This description suggests a painting of some ugliness and anxiety, and the whole, as well painted as it is, shows these "hilarious" people caught in a hysterical round of existence, with the further suggestion that this "merry-go-round" whirls the disorder of low-mimetic's comedy and realism into the drift and bondage of an ironic contemporary world. Frye writes, "If inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves, so that we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity, the hero belongs to the *ironic mode*" (34).

Stevens has a complete modal list—Plato: myth; Cervantes: romance; Verrocchio: high mimetic; Wills: low mimetic; Marsh: ironic. It is the structural logic of his modes, not of chronology alone, that causes Cervantes to

be mentioned before, even though he lived after, Verrocchio. It is the "merry-go-round," not the response of "hilarious reality," that makes this image of the "hero's power" ironic. By presenting his examples within a modal sequence, Stevens finds, as Frye does, that modes of individual works correlate with modes of different ages.

These illustrations of the relation between the imagination and reality are an outline on the basis of which to indicate a tendency. Their usefulness is this: that they help to make clear, what no one may ever have doubted, that just as *in this or that work* the degrees of the imagination and of reality may vary, so this variation may exist as *between the works of one age and the works of another*. (NA 12; emphasis added)

Similarly, Frye's "table" from myth to irony is intended to approximate neutrality. "Looking over this table, we can see that European fiction, during the last fifteen centuries, has steadily moved its center of gravity down the list" (34). Stevens concludes that these shifts illustrate a moral tendency downward. He says, "What I have said up to this point amounts to this: that the idea of nobility exists in art today only in degenerate forms or in a much diminished state, if, in fact, it exists at all or otherwise than on sufferance; that this is due to failure in the relation between the imagination and reality" (NA 12-13).

SECOND CATABASIS: THE DESCENT OF THEMATIC MODES  
(REPEATING THE CYCLE OF SECTION 2)

In section 3, Stevens moves from the first part of his title, the theme of "the noble rider," to the second, "the sound of words," where he sees a repetition of the descending pattern of degeneration. First, as with Plato's two "horses," he establishes his polarities of the denotative and the connotative forces in words; then, he provides a brief history of their dialectical ratios over several centuries. He finds symptomatic the theories of verbal reference given by Descartes, Locke, and Hobbes: their arguments for denotative over connotative usages illustrate the descent from the noble to the ignoble. "When we say that Locke and Hobbes denounced the connotative use of words as an abuse, and when we speak of reactions and reforms, we are speaking, on the one hand, of a failure of the imagination to adhere to reality, and, on the other, of a use of language favorable to reality" (NA 14).

Corresponding to Stevens' historical survey of denotation and connotation is Frye's second essay, "Ethical Criticism: Theory of Symbols," which begins,

Whenever we read anything, we find our attention moving in two directions at once. One direction is outward or centrifugal,

in which we keep going outside our reading, from the individual words to the things they mean, or, in practice, to our memory of the conventional association between them. The other direction is inward or centripetal, in which we try to develop from the words a sense of the larger verbal pattern they make. (73)

Frye's "larger verbal pattern" corresponds to Stevens' description of Joyce as "wholly connotative" (NA 14) and to his title "the Sound of Words," which is not only about raw physical vibrations, but, most importantly, about "sound" as the radical source for "the music of poetry":

I do not know of anything that will appear to have suffered more from the passage of time than the music of poetry and that has suffered less. The deepening need for words to express our thoughts and feelings which, we are sure, are all the truth that we shall ever experience, having no illusions, makes us listen to words when we hear them, loving them and feeling them, makes us search the sound of them, for a finality, a perfection, an unalterable vibration, which it is only within the power of the acutest poet to give them. Those of us who may have been thinking of the path of poetry, those who understand that words are thoughts and not only our own thoughts but the thoughts of men and women ignorant of what it is that they are thinking, must be conscious of this: that, above everything else, poetry is words; and that words, above everything else, are, in poetry, sounds. (NA 32)

"The music of poetry" is properly associated with Plato's "music" (*"mousike"*) and ultimately with the unity of the imagination, poetry, and culture. However, in his presentation, Stevens limits his application to the ratios in any cultural period of the centrifugal, denotative, scientific referential meaning of words and their centripetal, connotative, poetic powers and the co-function of both.

Seeking to show the power of reality in the decline of culture, Stevens emphasizes the pressures of denotation. For his examples, he names some contemporary cultural icons: "The ["wholly connotative"] language of Joyce goes along [co-exists] with the dilapidations of Braque and Picasso and the music of the Austrians" (NA 15). "[D]ilapidations" is hardly what his use of Picasso in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" just a few years earlier comes to. But in the poem, the Picasso he favors is the early work, and what he rejects now is probably that of analytic cubism, just as he rejects the composers using the twelve-tone method. The reason is that, in his view, they apply scientific methods or limiting rationality to their different arts.

Stevens wraps together the highly diverse theories of language of Descartes, Locke, and Hobbes and the theories of abstraction in art of Braque, Picasso, Schönberg, Berg, and Webern. He sees these as analogous to the figure of the "noble rider" as exemplified currently in the ironic painting *Wooden Horses*. The operation of the "sound of words" is restricted to the centrifugal and referential meanings and to the ironic and scientific dilapidations, in his view, of these artists. However, Stevens himself is now re-enacting these dilapidations by using proper names iconically for their denotations and conventional associations. For example, he is not differentiating the Picasso he likes from the Picasso he disapproves of. He thus demonstrates in his own example the results of reality pressuring him. By using names referentially and by expressing his disbelief in contemporary art, Stevens has dropped from the heights of Plato's noble myth to the ignoble foot of the Parnassian hill. His discourse has shifted from listing the descent of the hero's power in the modal scale to indicating his moral attitude to this audience.

As these artists are seen as denotative, scientific, or ironic, so too has Stevens' perspective revealed itself as ironic. "Reality" has exerted its pressures on him, and he perceives culture, language, and poetic theory from a low point in the ironic mode. He has descended to listing his own version of Hegel's "petty interests of everyday life," including one of his "pet peeves": "Another part of the war-like whole to which we do not respond quite as we do to the news of war is the income tax. The blanks [income tax forms] are specimens of mathematical prose. They titillate the instinct of self-preservation in a class in which that instinct has been forgotten" (NA 21). To follow Plato's myth—Stevens' own imaginary ignoble horse has drawn the noble rider down to this feeble irony regarding "reality." In sum, he is dramatizing that "the spirit of the age," this "war-like whole" in which he lives and from which none can escape, is "ironic" and that the arts and his lecture as well are "ironic."

This moment of putting forward his petty attitudes under the pressure of "reality" contains his own self-recognition that he has been doing just that. By expressing his pettiness instead of describing Plato, Stevens realigns his relationship with his audience and emphasizes his attitude, or the thematic mode, of the *ieron*. The *ieron*, in Frye, "is the man who deprecates himself" (40). At the same time, Stevens holds in reserve his own participation in the life of the "imagination," which protects him. "Such a man," says Frye, "makes himself invulnerable, and . . . there is no question that he is a predestined artist" (40). Stevens' knowledge of centuries of art and of the world at war has diminished to a presentation of the powerless and petty passions of the self-conscious individual. "These constitute the drift of incidents," he says, "to which we accustom ourselves as to the weather" (NA 19).

Stevens asserts people can adjust to the disarray of this "reality," but with its pressures they cannot secure any tranquility, any contemplation,

which is the goal of his own thinking and work in writing poems and the intent of his lecture.

We are confronting, therefore, a set of events, not only beyond our power to tranquilize them in the mind, beyond our power to reduce them and metamorphose them, but events that stir the emotions to violence, that engage us in what is direct and immediate and real, and events that involve the concepts and sanctions that are the order of our lives and may involve our very lives; and these events are occurring persistently with increasing omen, in what may be called our presence. (NA 22)

His phrase "increasing omen" may be taken as a symptom of the dangerous predicament of the "imagination" and of isolating the hero in the ironic mode, especially when living in the era of "the war-like whole." States of agitation and worry are generalized in the drama of this lecture or the life of the lecturer by "reality." "By the pressure of reality, I mean the pressure of an external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation" (NA 20). Such contemplation is analogous to abiding in Hegel's "higher inward life, the intellectual operations of a purer sort."

Stevens acknowledges his ironic perspective and indicates that he has his hidden reserve, his potential, of imagination: "These, nevertheless, are not the things that I had in mind when I spoke of the pressure of reality" (NA 19). He anticipates the judgment that his own attempt at sweeping cultural generalizations may be seen as pretention and affectation:

The definition ought to be exact and, as it is, may be merely pretentious. But when one is trying to think of a whole generation and of a world at war, and trying at the same time to see what is happening to the imagination, particularly if one believes that that is what matters most, the plainest statement of what is happening can easily appear to be an affectation. (NA 20)

The deflection of criticism by others is typical of the ironic thematic mode. Frye writes, "The ironic fiction-writer, then, deprecates himself and, like Socrates, pretends to know nothing, even that he is ironic" (40). Stevens continues in the way of the *ieron*. "Here I am, well-advanced in my paper, with everything of interest that I started out to say remaining to be said" (NA 27). The descent into the ironic mode on the ignoble horse of reality has reached its nadir and it is time for re-ascending the modes on the horse carrying a combatant imagination. Gaining control of himself, Stevens, reflecting on his being an example of an *ieron* living overburdened by centrifugal "reality" in an ironic age, draws his conclusion: "These are the things that I had in mind when I spoke of the pressure of reality, a

pressure great enough and prolonged enough to bring about the end of one era in the history of the imagination and, if so, then great enough to bring about the beginning of another" (NA 22).

#### ANABASIS: THE ASCENT OF POETRY

In section 4, Stevens, still as an *iron*, draws on the strengths of his "imagination," initiating a new attitude for himself and a new era for others. He reverses the descent into the narrowness, confinement, even imprisonment, of ironic consciousness squeezed by "realism" and the demand for referential limits on words. The pressures of "reality" tighten the main-spring of the "imagination" to its limit, and the "imagination" counter-attacks with its own violence. As he says later, "It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality" (NA 36). He expands from his reactions of mere fancy to the dominance of his active "imagination" or, in the figure of Plato's myth, he renews the strength of the noble horse. Irony, writes Frye, "begins in realism. . . . But as it does so, it moves steadily towards myth" (42). Stevens shifts his attention from his self-regard as a put-upon individual to the task of constructing a new figure from the center of his "imagination": "Suppose we try, now, to construct the figure of a poet, a *possible poet*" (NA 23; emphasis added). From his irony and "reality," Stevens is looking up toward an all-encompassing myth. This calls for a sharp ascent.

Of the "possible poet," Stevens says, "He must have lived all of the last two thousand years, and longer" (NA 23). He must have a "huge imagination," capable of overcoming different kinds of remoteness, the remoteness of two thousand years, of geography, and of any activity that participates in the products of the intellect in the pursuit of truth, denotation, and reality ("things as they are"), and, not least, war and death. "The possible poet" "abstracts himself" and takes everything within his "imagination": "what is remote becomes near, and what is dead lives with an intensity beyond any experience of life" (NA 23). Stevens' "possible poet" is one form of Frye's anagoric artists such as Dante and Blake, for whom all history is perceived and contained in the single mind or, as Joyce writes, "Allspace in a Notshall" (455), or Mallarmé, "All Thought emits a Throw of the Dice" (144-45).

Stevens' idea of "abstractions" is different from that of analytic cubism or the twelve-tone method, suggested earlier. He contrasts their abstractions as scientific to his own as "imaginative," an art participating in the all-inclusive history and geography enduring in the connotative "music of poetry." Frye is again relevant to Stevens: "The anagoric view . . . leads to the conception of literature as existing in its own universe, no longer a commentary on life or reality, but containing life and reality in a system of verbal relationships" (122). Stevens' anagoric or mythic hero differs from Frye's pure anagoric state because the imagined figure he proposes is not

“absolute,” but only a “construction,” a “possible poet,” with a “huge imagination.” This calm language of common-sense reasonableness is used because not only can reality not be eliminated entirely, but also he does not want to try: “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). Stevens allows “reality” to exert its presence without overwhelming the imagination. Containing all time and all space in his “huge imagination,” the mythic “possible poet,” projected by the *eiron* lecturer, recognizes that the “imagination” and “reality” are equal and can represent life as it is truly lived and imagined. The “possible poet” must possess the strength to hold in the mind at once these opposites, mutually exclusive and mutually necessary, in order to experience and assimilate reality into the imagination and to transform its pressure into tranquility.

The act of constructing a “possible poet” with a “huge imagination” means the activity of the “imagination” of Stevens has changed and is continuing to change. To borrow from Stevens’ “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet,” “The way a poet feels when he is writing, or after he has written, a poem that completely accomplishes his purpose is evidence of the personal nature of his activity. To describe it by exaggerating it, he shares the transformation, not to say apotheosis, accomplished by the poem” (NA 49). Similarly, in this essay Stevens’ mind is changed when he changes his subject. The imagination of the *eiron*, as artist and craftsman, reacting against the pressure of reality, expresses the desire and freedom to invent a mythic figure.

In Section 5, Stevens has held up for his own exploratory contemplation the new figure of the “possible poet” and presented this figure for the audience’s consideration. The “possible poet” retains the remnant aura of the “noble rider,” and, therefore, the “possible poet” does not and cannot exist without these words, just as Plato’s charioteer-soul cannot exist without his words. In this section, however, there are references to the virtue of nobility, but not to the “noble rider.” Why did Stevens not return to his primary figure with a reference to, for example, the cycle of Phaethon or new sparks of poetry from Pegasus? Stevens is clear: “He cannot be a charioteer traversing vacant space, however ethereal” (NA 23). “Ethereal” flight is sterile in blank space, while his fall—as negatively as Stevens views it—brings him down to fertile earth. The lecture—which began with a recollection of Plato’s mythic imagination and then descended through all the modes in sequence to irony and iron “reality”—has been re-grounded in “reality,” and the “imagination” returns to action and proposes a mythic major man, the “possible poet,” for readers. This sequence in his presentation forms a dramatic cycle or inward-turning spiral, from centrifugal “reality” to centripetal “imagination.” Contacting the necessary “reality” of the earth, like Antaeus, Stevens renews the strength of his imagination.

The pressure on the “possible poet” is now to write for society. But the “possible poet” does not write to satisfy society’s needs. He works, Frye writes, “more as a craftsman than as a creator or as ‘unacknowledged legislator’ ” (60–61). The poet has no social obligation. Seemingly removed from society in every way, the “possible poet” is associated with the ambiguously provocative notions of “epicures” and “escapism.” Stevens insists, “I repeat that his role is to help people to live their lives” (NA 30). How? This contradiction is dissolved by his constant love, “*un amoureux perpétuel*,” of the world. To show how poems based on an *amor mundi* can work to carry the readers out of the “poverty” of reality, or the philosopher’s empty space, Stevens quotes lines from Wordsworth’s “Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802”:

Escapism has a pejorative sense, which it cannot be supposed that I include in the sense in which I use the word. The pejorative sense applies where the poet is not attached to reality, where the imagination does not adhere to reality, which, for my part, I regard as fundamental. If we go back to the collection of solid, static objects extended in space . . . and if we say that the space is blank space, nowhere, without color, and that objects, though solid, have no shadows and, though static, exert a mournful power, and, without elaborating this complete poverty, if suddenly we hear a different and familiar description of the place:

*This City now doth, like a garment, wear  
The beauty of the morning, silent bare,  
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie  
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;  
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air;*

if we have this experience, we know how poets help people to live their lives. This illustration must serve for all the rest. (NA 30–31)

How does this demonstrate the poet’s help? First, why the city? This idea of the city is important to Stevens, for a poet’s distant vision of the city recurs throughout his poetry, from his college sonnets to, for example, his celebration of Santayana in “To an Old Philosopher in Rome.” Wordsworth’s London, a city Stevens never saw, a city so precisely located in actuality as to be marked in the title’s place and time, exists in actuality and yet, for readers like Stevens who never traveled to England, it exists only in its words, or in “the sound of words” resonating in the imagination. In Frye’s schematic, the last and highest stage of literature is where “pure poetry” constructs “a city” and “a community.”



In the anagogic phase, literature imitates the total dream of man, and so imitates the thought of a human mind which is at the circumference and not at the center of its reality. . . . When we pass into anagogy, nature becomes, not the container, but the thing contained, and the archetypal universal symbols, the city, the garden, the quest, the marriage, are no longer the desirable forms that man constructs inside nature, but are themselves the forms of nature. Nature is now inside the mind of an infinite man who builds cities out of the Milky Way. (119)

This resembles, but is not the same as, the "huge imagination" of the "possible poet." Stevens makes this identity:

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

Wordsworth stood at a circumference, looking at the city; Stevens, at an even more distant circumference, looks back through all space and all time, as though through Wordsworth's eyes, to see Wordsworth's vision of the city. Quoting Wordsworth, without fanfare, he illustrates the power of poetry to remind, to console, to revitalize. "I repeat that [the poet's] role is to help people to live their lives" (NA 30). Thus, in his choice of Wordsworth's London, he renews the vitality, increases the strength, and enriches the "imagination" against the poverty and violence of "reality."

PRINCETON, MAY 8, 1941

Stevens' lecture, read in relation to the structure of analogies in Frye's essays, reveals that it does follow a logic, one that differs from that found in the usual lecture. The structure of its logic propels an emotional and intellectual drama that moves consistently through its introduction and five sections, using five fictional modes, to emphasizing one of the five thematic modes. Stevens' manner is somewhat academic in his references to philosophy and art and in his avoiding ornament and sentimentality. As an *ieron*, he emphasizes his own modesty. A full analysis of the thematic mode of the lecture would obviously lead to a systematic study of Stevens' rhetorical motives. Then, after transposing both the full sequence of the fictional modes and the single thematic mode of the *ieron*-lecturer into various rhetorical motives, the lecture suggests consideration as the academic performance of a remarkable emotional and intellectual drama that is also a self-portrait.

Stevens' self-consciousness suggests that he seeks something beyond the artifice of a lecture, something about the broader world, something, for example, to cause the auditors to be aware of their immediate situation. Notice how he incorporates the audience in his observations: "This being so, my time and yours might have been better spent . . ." (NA 32). Stevens reminds them of the feeling of their own actuality here and now, that they are in Princeton, that he lives in West Hartford and works in Hartford and writes poems, that it is 1941 and a time of war. They are here, together. At the same time, his use of Wordsworth offers a relationship of Wordsworth to London, of himself to Wordsworth's poem, of poets to their poems such that the relationship points out the power of the poet to work at a distance. In this indirect, circumstantial approach, Stevens justifies his stance as a poet who appears aloof and yet is truly not aloof from the war and world events nor useless to society.

Stevens' preference for distance from the pressures of involvement, especially in the war effort, is not new to him. In his lecture, he singles out the decade of the 1910–1920 as an especially creative period, one that includes the First World War. He finds a similarity in these two dire moments in world history and in his life at the threshold of war:

I am trying to give the feel of it. It was the reality of twenty or thirty years ago. I say that it was a vital reality. . . . It was vital in the sense of being tense, of being instinct with the fatal or with what might be the fatal. . . . Reality then became violent and so remains. . . . This much ought to be said to make it a little clearer that in speaking of the pressure of reality, I am thinking of life in a state of violence, not physically violent, as yet, for us in America, but physically violent for millions of our friends and for still more millions of our enemies and spiritually violent, it may be said, for everyone alive. (NA 26)

In that earlier period, one of the poems resembling in an important way this lecture is "Sunday Morning." A comparison of both the poem and the lecture suggests that for their compositions his motives in 1915 and 1941 were similar. In "Sunday Morning," as Stevens moves from stanza to stanza, he modulates the focus, the lexicon, the questions, and the attitudes as though changing his approach to the woman's anxieties regarding death and her wishes to escape nature's absolute death. After the poet's introductory stanza, each of the subsequent seven stanzas draws upon central qualities of periods in European and American cultural history, such as ancient Greek paganism, Roman decay of the gods and Christian enthusiasm, late-medieval Christianity, Renaissance humanistic perspectivism, etc.<sup>2</sup> It is as though the values of each cultural period serve as a medium for considering her questions. Stevens' constant reference is to the natural world, implying his later assertion of his *amour perpétuel* of the

world. He writes "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" after reading or reading about Hegel and Vico, and at the time that he is preparing for the lecture, according to Richardson, he "copied and underlined on a piece of paper laid in Adams's volume [on Vico]—'the true history of the human race . . . a history of its progressive mental states'" (173). He uses this in different ways in both the poem and the lecture.

Why did Stevens use the approach of a "history of an idea" (in the episodic history of the figure of the "noble rider") to describe a "history of mental states," and why at this time? "Sunday Morning," written in 1915, traces a theme of the idea of absolute death, the irrelevance of religious myths, and the understanding of on-going processes of nature. It is repeated in brief in his explicit response to the war in "The Death of a Soldier." When Henry Church engaged Stevens' interest in the Princeton lecture, it was the start of the European war and before the U.S. entered. The summer of 1915 was also after the European war began and before the U.S. entered. Both "Sunday Morning" and "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" are responses to the wars, not in the Whitmanesque detail of the seventh stanza of the poem or in the reference to Colleoni in the lecture, but in his feeling the crisis in Europe and the collapse of cultural values.

At both critical times, it was important to recall the episodes of European culture. The history in "Sunday Morning" of "mental states" as found throughout European culture engages the problem of appealing to nature or religion in response to death, with poetry itself offering, as a positive medium, an answer that is solid, even if temporary. The history of "mental states" in European culture in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" confronts the problem of nobility and love as perceived with an imagination that encompasses reality in response to war. In both cases, the imagination must be adequate to reality, and if reality is violent, the imagination is and must be as vigorous and, therefore, as violent, to facilitate bringing about the preferred state of tranquility and contemplation. In each case, there is a violent resistance by the artistic imagination to the pressures exerted by the violent reality of war: war destroys cities; poetry builds them.

#### CONCLUSION: AND "WHAT ABOUT NOBILITY?"

The density of Stevens' lecture is a result of decades of thoughtful struggles with the issues of the engagement of poetry in war time and the autonomy of the artist. That it conforms to Frye's "historical cycle" in the sequence of five fictive modes, with each section enclosing and immersing a set of examples seen from within Stevens' distinct ironic mode, suggests that it should be viewed as a drama of rhetorical motives. The dramatic direction of his ironic cultural history is a ("tragic") "fall" from the "myth" of the "charioteer" down toward "romance," "high mimetic," and "low mimetic" into "irony," where contact by the individual self with the earth

recalls him to a (“comic”) “rise” to vital productivity, communication, and community. This ascent is enforced by the strength of the imagination of the poet and sustained by his “*amoureux perpétuel*” of the real world. The circle or inward-turning spiral of Stevens’ lecture, from the myth of the “noble rider” of Plato’s “gorgeous nonsense” to his own myth of the “possible poet,” has at its center the consonance of the word and the world in the figure of the poetic city and actuality. The mental traveler along this spiral is the poet in the figure of a “charioteer,” a “noble rider,” the “possible poet.” It is the lecturer Stevens, whose thought and feelings are pulled down by the ignoble horse of reality and who, by the strength of the imagination, ascends to the “bright and glittering” city. Implicitly, the lecturer impresses the minds of his auditors and ennobles and strengthens their “imagination” in the midst of this “war-like whole.”

“What about nobility . . . ?” (NA 31–32). Wordsworth’s poem of a vision of an actual city contains in the “sound of words” “the beauty of the morning” and “the music of poetry.” In his speech at Princeton, Stevens “re-sounds” Wordsworth’s city in response to the immediate pressure of reality and history. Precisely when he chooses Wordsworth’s Westminster view of London, he is reading about the reality of the war in Europe. Without saying so, still an *éiron*, Stevens acknowledges the German bombings of English cities in the Battle of Britain and recalls the Paris of his host and friend, Henry Church, helping both him and the others survive Europe’s lowest point of reality. Into this complex analogy of Wordsworth’s London, Stevens’ Europe during the First World War, Church’s Paris, and Stevens’ own Hartford during the Second World War, Stevens affirms his conviction that the supreme fiction of nobility, as found in art, is a moving force of permanence in a world of change. He compares nobility to a wave:

But as a wave is a force and not the water of which it is composed, which is never the same, so nobility is a force and not the manifestations of which it is composed, which are never the same. (NA 35–36)

Clearly, Stevens’ “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” is not a mere compendium of his reading nor mainly a collection of ideas about poetry and the imagination. Rather, it is a careful arrangement of the forms of emotion and intellect that comprise a drama that demonstrates the need for the work of the “possible poet” in times of war and peace.

City College, CUNY and  
University of Massachusetts at Amherst

## Notes

This essay is dedicated to Devra, Paul, Aaron, Nathan, and Julian Feshbach-Meriney. I want to thank Lorine Parks for her responses to an early version.

<sup>1</sup> The lecture-essay, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," was first collected in *The Language of Poetry*, edited by Allen Tate, published by Princeton University Press in 1942, with Philip Wheelwright's "Poetry, Myth, and Reality," Cleanth Brooks' "The Language of Paradox," and I.A. Richards' "The Interactions of Words," and re-published *The Necessary Angel* in 1951. A comparison of Stevens' essays with the other essays shows several similarities, e.g., references to "denotative" vs. "connotative," science vs. poetry, the Wordsworth poem; it implies commonplaces of the time and communications from Allen Tate; sorting these out can help to differentiate Stevens' individual views.

<sup>2</sup> See my article, "A Pretext for Wallace Stevens' 'Sunday Morning,'" which demonstrates an extensive correlation between the stanzas of the poem and chapters of Santayana's *Interpretation of Poetry and Religion*.

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## Poems

### The Great Physician

Spring's bright paradise has come to this.  
The stethoscope of the sun is on my breast.  
I am a package and the string that holds me  
is crazed and flayed. I hold a leash, but there  
is no dog.

In Canada, Spring toppled over and couldn't  
get up. No one laughed. They buried her  
prematurely. She didn't mind.

A myth is not a fact. It is a pile of hay  
with fascinating people stuck beneath,  
laughing.

A myth is a gargoyle with rust on his  
beard. Life doesn't stop for you; he  
whispers to the crowd.

When the fog lifted, I took a tugboat  
out to sea and I married it. The sea.  
We live honorably. Apart from that,  
I am a show girl with a skinny repertoire  
of wellness. But I am able to speak into  
caves, and I do, saying hello, hello,  
and hearing someone say it back,  
the way it happened in paradise.

Virginia Konchan  
Lexington, Va.

## Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Fog

I

The fog rolled in  
like white water  
foaming up the shore.

II

As I looked upon the city lights,  
the fog beamed  
like diamond prisms in the light.

III

I took a deep breath;  
the fog  
inhaled me.

IV

Amid the clear eastern mountain range  
all was still, except the fog  
moving in the valley.

V

When we touched,  
she left tears upon my windows  
that sat still upon the glass.

VI

As the air becomes more dense,  
my mind begins to wander—  
the fog smiles.

VII

I tried to catch it once  
in a bottle;  
it never was the same.

VIII

The fog held me  
so gently, like a cushion  
from reality.

IX

Like a magician  
the fog reveals only  
what it chooses.

X

The fog blankets the earth  
like a white down sheet  
innocently hovering.

XI

The fog prefers to sleep  
in the cemetery  
as the spirits walk freely.

XII

The morning brings  
to the river  
its disciple kneeling.

XIII

As the sun proceeds  
the fog ascends to the heavens  
to be reborn in the valleys of our minds.

Christopher Arnold  
Richland, Wash.

### Teaching

Before my careless arm  
felt the cow's pumice tongue,  
I saw black-red, burnt orange  
as I rose, like a drunken man,  
giddy, gritty, off the ground.

The same creature who had  
kicked me in the way its tail  
would flick a fly had turned and  
begun to lick me, like love.

I was the fractured one,  
doubled-visioned, foaming  
like a beast, while it,  
the true beast, was calm  
as a hard-handed teacher  
with a lesson to be learned,  
holding the lectern, teaching.

Willie James King  
Montgomery, Ala.



## The Crazy Giant

Leave the gray plate of clouds overhead,  
the farms pigged and goated, and follow a string  
of taut light into the crazy giant's house

where, stupid and cunning, he hides in a closet—  
but which one?—with his axe, hoping that nothing  
can hurt a useless thing, turn it into farmer

or fireman, no cracked tree into coffins or pencils.  
He used to dream that an enormous collie  
and he were tussling with Granny's pink girdle,

but lately dreams he is a green mouse, the Wizard  
of Chartreuse, or worse luck, a living holly  
squashed between two panes of glass. Heavens,

sometimes he looks into the mirror for so long  
that he trembles and runs, suspecting the fun  
of hiding less than the horror of being found.

He smells the freshest smell of nightsoil now,  
of something digesting wood. How he wants to run  
to all the hamlets in town, flying some flame-

colored banner over his head—but he and Prince  
bark at winter sundogs and keep on running and  
running along what enchanted old chainlink fence?

Patricia Corbus  
Sarasota, Fla.

## Cold Poem

This is a cold poem, written  
at the back of a cave where  
many people died. Their  
eyes cruise like alligator eyes  
in the dark. Don't touch  
this poem. It wouldn't like it.  
Go to the beach. Go to a movie.  
Shop for the doodads you love.  
My God kills before he cures,  
then kills again. He suits me  
down to the ground. Your fingers  
are beginning to stick to the  
page. Under no circumstances  
touch your tongue to this poem.  
Do not try to eat this poem.  
It is full of germs. It gives  
a deadly case of the flu. Take  
vitamins. Put on a coat. Get  
out of here while you have  
time, before you get the shakes.  
Too late. I warned you, sucker.

Patricia Corbus  
Sarasota, Fla.

## Slow Movement by Ives

*First Piano Sonata, Third Movement*

We've put a stop to Saturday night. Slide Sunday in, but smoothly.  
"What a friend we have" is the opinion of the maple branches  
Pawing daybreak's lightly rising wind. And "What a friend"  
Concurs the head upon the pillow soon to rise  
To chores before the time moves up to dress for church.  
A pliant rigor rules; the world is satisfied.  
Fan out. Fan out. Encounter conscience, clothes and enterprise:  
Enlist all means to bandage up the need to need.  
It's really better to be serious, agreed? Agreed.  
(Don't think I didn't see your smile just then.)  
The soul needs elbow grease, forget-me-nots and mustard plasters.  
There is no such thing as despair. If you're troubled it's mostly  
Spill from last night I shouldn't wonder. What a friend. Friend?  
Smooth, with growth of day there comes a second growth.  
Slow reactivation of the need to need. Fan out,  
Fan out. What if we hit church late. No one who cares  
For us will be the ones to twitch from conscience in their pews,  
And watch how biding here will gratify the maple branches.  
Let them prompt what happens next, wiggled by their wind.  
Friend. Friend? Friend. Friend? Friend.

T. P. Perrin  
Binghamton, N.Y.

## Metaphysics in Winter

The space between two snowflakes is the distance between  
The look of the world and the world we look at. And the snow  
Keeps falling on principle, leaving holes in the cold air  
Just big enough for dead philosophers to slip through.

Elton Glaser  
Akron, Ohio

## Late Lessons from the Master of Hartford

1

Misers in their misery  
Draw back from anything that might diminish them,  
And so grow small, collapsing to

The distant weather of themselves, the zero zone,  
Where the closed bud  
Can't open on a day of creamy clouds and green sun,

Or go to seed  
Like children scattered in a park,  
The naked light of afternoon warm on their limbs.

2

We go to meet them,  
The difficult pleasures of the poem, though everywhere  
The glassy silences

Frown at anything beyond the primitive,  
Sneer down the emerald air, rubies at sunset,  
The wind that spends itself all summer in the trees.

And we give to them  
What they demand, ourselves, no miracle or sacrament,  
No brooding rendezvous,

But surrender to the rough silk, the crippled ease  
Of these stanzas, erotics of resistance  
In the complicating lines.

3

Those for whom the world is either  
Dew-deep or driven by a star  
Red as a rat's eye,

Men who lie down sedated on the moss,  
Women whose minds  
Crackle like static from the lean ferocities of space,

Miss the midday dazzle  
From stoop to roof, and find themselves  
In a false sheen, a fraud of constellating tinsel.

The swollen earth, at noon,  
Sheds its shadow and, even in the icy months,  
Goes nude among the ruins,

Too little and too much for those who mourn  
The riot of bright leaves and look  
Past the empty branches for

A bulge of gold in the blue, nervous  
Under the snow-swags, the green-sable patience of  
The cedar, the hemlock, the yew.

Elton Glaser  
Akron, Ohio

### Evenings at the Coconut Hotel

They had come for fire, for barbarous waters  
And the blood of sun, nothing so subtle  
As this gold and mauve, this lavender,  
This rose muting a slate blue. They could  
Blame it on the season, or the false brochures,  
Or the bloom of clouds that opens like  
Late hibiscus in the terra cotta pots,  
But not themselves, not when the day's expense  
Ends in a tonic of desire, a sweating glass  
Held against the sky and sea, through which  
They saw the heavens settle in a calm of stars,  
The moon among them, and so much light  
Immaculate on the white cloth and crystal,  
On the bone plates, such brilliance rising  
From the terrace tiles, they felt as if they sat  
Inside the pure approval of a diamond, cool and clear,  
And called the waiter for another drink.

Elton Glaser  
Akron, Ohio

## Reviews

### **Atlantic Poets: Fernando Pessoa's Turn in Anglo-American Modernism.**

By Irene Ramalho Santos. Lebanon, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2003.

Portuguese-language literature may not rank as high as those of other Romance languages, but it boasts a handful of first-rate writers. Brazil's Machado de Assis, generally considered the greatest fictionist in the language, has recently been "discovered" by such heavyweights of U.S. criticism as Susan Sontag and Harold Bloom. Portugal's Fernando Pessoa (1888–1935) is clearly among the very best Lusophone poets, and the subtitle of Irene Ramalho Santos' *Atlantic Poets* suggests that it is now Pessoa's turn to bask in the esteem of the English-language critical establishment. The extraordinary body of poetry he produced—under his "orthonym" Fernando Pessoa and various "heteronyms" such as Álvaro de Campos, Alberto Caeiro, and Ricardo Reis—is indeed unique in modern Western literature.

Santos' strategy is to treat Pessoa as a full-fledged Anglo-American modernist. He was partly brought up in English-speaking South Africa; he wrote a considerable body of poetry in English (although few would argue that it includes any of his best poems); and much of his work may be seen as a dialogue with Walt Whitman. To these facts Santos adds her own thesis, the book's central leitmotif: at least two of Pessoa's *personae*, Pessoa himself and Campos, were involved, together with Hart Crane, in a visionary artistic project called "Atlanticism."

This idea is explored particularly in Chapter 3, a parallel reading of two "imperial poems" (84), Crane's *The Bridge* and Pessoa's *Mensagem*. Atlanticism combines two elements. One is the Romantic "truth-beauty-poetry complex" (86), as expressed in Shelley's "rhetoric of poetry as the sum total of (Western) values" (85) and in Whitman's identification of himself with America and of America with the whole world. The other is "the idea that the developed nations of the Atlantic must congregate their efforts to maintain the economic and political balance of the world" (87). But while *The Bridge* is a paean to the newborn American empire, marked by Whitmanian optimism, *Mensagem*, a poem cycle more elegiac than epic in tone, alludes to the history of the rise and decline of the Portuguese empire, its "message" being "that Portugal's national identity in modernity coincides with its poetic identity, or, simply, that modern Portugal's *possibility of being* is nothing but *cultural*, indeed, *poetic creativity* proper" (106). It is thanks to such poems as *Mensagem* that the Portuguese nation can still claim any sort of imperial majesty.

Chapter 6 is a comparative reading of Pessoa and Wallace Stevens. Santos begins with a discussion of "'poetic angelism'": according to the Portuguese scholar Eduardo Lourenço, the figure of the angel is frequently used in modern poetry "as a metaphor for poetry, the plenitude of the word, the figure of the poet himself" (201). Santos argues that Stevens' Canon Aspirin in "Notes

toward a Supreme Fiction” and Pessoa’s Caeiro (the heteronym who is supposed to be the master of the others, including Pessoa himself) are both angelic figures ultimately derived from Whitman. She then compares Whitman’s identification of America with the world to the Canon Aspirin’s role as the “atemporal, self-authorizing poet in the Western tradition” (211)—a comparison warranted by the coda of “Notes,” with its allusion to World War II—concluding that “both poets’ theory of poetry as an international or even transnational language is inevitably betrayed by their inescapably localized practice of poetry” (210). Stevens’ perspective is “a Western point of view, hence a discovering and imposing point of view,” and “undeniably patriarchal also,” as the reference to the Earth as “‘fat girl’ ” shows (212–13). So we are taken, by way of imperialism, ethnocentrism, and phallogentrism, back to Atlanticism.

Atlanticism is the book’s major theme, but there are other important concepts, all taken from Pessoa’s prose writings—arrogance, interruption, disquietude, and intersexuality. It would be impossible to do justice to them all in a review this brief: they would require a more thorough examination of Pessoa’s ideas. Let us simply mention in passing two concepts.

Poetic arrogance is defined as

the assumption (indeed, *arrogation*) of a primordial status, in the etymological sense of the word, a site that is privileged with knowledge, authority, and eventually even a certain kind of power (in the sense of “possibility”), for no other reason than that it coincides with poetry itself understood as the absolute grounding of the totality and perfection of reality (both center and circumference at one and the same time, in Shelley’s terms). (117)

In this passage, as elsewhere, Santos does not make things easy for the reader, but the examples she discusses make her point quite clear: however marginal a poet’s status—e.g., Emily Dickinson as a woman and Pessoa as the representative of a decadent imperial power—she or he can claim central status by affirming poetry’s centrality. Santos’ penetrating discussion of Dickinson, Reis, and Campos is another high point in the book.

The discussion of poetic interruption, in Chapter 7, begins with the perceptive observation that poets often “complain that what is commonly called ‘interruption’ constantly threatens the freedom of their creativity” (222)—witness Coleridge’s “person from Porlock” (the subject of an essay by Pessoa)—while in fact it is precisely this “forceful, *interruptive* calling of attention to an utterance, whether from without *or* within” (222) that allows poems to get written. Santos illustrates interruption by the external world (which she calls “‘politics’ ” [222]) in works by various contemporary U.S. and Portuguese poets before turning to Pessoa for an example of interruption from the inside: his “waking dream is the illusion of identity as it is self-reflectively interrupted by his fiction of the heteronyms *as writing*” (237). But when she goes on to write that a text by prospero saiz “is an American poem that chooses to interrupt the nation by actually having no nation, or borders of any kind”

(247), the concept of interruption is stretched to the point where it loses whatever explanatory power it might have had.

All in all, *Atlantic Poets* is a valuable, insightful work; although it is a collection of individual essays, the author successfully articulates the different strands into a single cogent argument. Santos' emphasis on imperialism, ethnocentrism, and other overworked *isms* is at times too predictable, and her language, as has been shown, is not always clear and elegant. She has a particular fondness for the ungainly phrase "make problematic" (clearly a translation of *problematizar*, a word ugly enough in Portuguese), and at one point manages to use it twice in the same sentence. Perhaps the idea is to avoid that tired war-horse, "subvert," but one wonders whether this is really an improvement. These, however, are the common flaws of contemporary lit speak; the book's strengths—scholarliness, intelligence, and, most importantly, a genuine feel for poetry—are the author's own. Although Santos says she "takes for granted that Pessoa has now been 'discovered' by English-speaking readers as one of the finest poets of Western modernism" (3), this reviewer believes he deserves far more international renown than he currently has and fervently hopes that *Atlantic Poets* will help further this worthiest of literary causes.

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### **Shifting Ground: Reinventing Landscape in Modern American Poetry.**

By Bonnie Costello. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003.

In reclaiming "the vitality of landscape in modern poetry and art" (11), Bonnie Costello devotes a chapter each to six poets—Frost, Stevens, Moore, Clampitt, Ammons, Ashbery—and briefly alludes, in her "Introduction: Frame and Flux," to several others—Gertrude Stein, William Cullen Bryant, Emerson, Jorie Graham, Charles Wright. Expanding the idea of landscape as a human construction, Costello shows landscape to be the very "design" of poetry as well as "a mirror reflecting our fears and fantasies" and "a figure for our real and symbolic entanglement with the earth as we take the view of it" (10). Her poets also reveal the cultural and archaeological geography of landscapes in their concerns about human ecology and historical ecology. Costello's approach brilliantly challenges an academic argument, of the past forty years, that "landscape is an exhausted, even an insidious genre" (11), a view based on narrow, ideological perception, such as W. J. T. Mitchell's view that "'Landscape is a particular historical formation associated with European imperialism'" (13). Costello explores an alternate American tradition, "which cultivates open engagement with the virtual world over mastery of a rationalized one" (12). This exploration, Costello says, continues Elisa New's reassessment in *The Line's Eye: Poetic Experience, American Sight*. To her study Costello brings vast knowledge and sound judgment about each poet and their relation to one another based in part on her own publications of the past fifteen years, superb skill in close reading of poems, and a lucid and witty style. The book is a pleasure to read.



The poems of the first chapter, "Frost's Crossings," in Costello's analysis, provide a template for landscape poems through Frost's mastery of modernist framing of flux and his dazzling use of chiasmus that highlights his genius at presenting all sides of an issue almost simultaneously. Frost's influence is strong throughout *Shifting Ground*, culminating in the last chapter, "John Ashbery: Landscapepeople": Frost "anticipates John Ashbery" (49), who is, Costello says, "a trickster figure, a prestidigitator always shifting ground and throwing you off balance . . . taking to an extreme Frost's 'directive' to get his reader lost" (174). The chapter on "Stevens' Eccentricity," part of which appeared in the *Wallace Stevens Journal* (Fall 1993) under the title "The Adequacy of Landscape," is here enhanced in significant ways by summary sentences at the end of many paragraphs; a brief preface, "Beholding the World in Parts," before "The Adequacy of Landscape"; and a substantial new section, "Time-space and Tragedy," which offers an eloquent reading of "The Auroras of Autumn" as "a tragic poem, for it sets a recognition of the fundamentally temporal and uncentered nature of reality against an unattainable desire for centered wholeness conceived in spatial terms" (73-74).

Frost's spatial terms are "full of choices" (38), and so is his temporality, which Costello divides into three kinds, "Pastoral Time, Evolutionary Time, Lyric Time," and applies to Stevens' "visionary project in the late poetry" (73), which "articulates a tragic gap between the aspiration for spatial apotheosis, and the experience of space as a maelstrom of flux and change. His turn toward the maelstrom, his imbuing of space with the same vital, dialectical force associated with time, constitutes a heroic ethos in the poem" (205, n 13). This is a definitive contradiction of Frost's careless put-down of Stevens as a writer of "bric-a-brac" (14). Stevens did not so misunderstand Frost's *chiamata*. His temperament, and his training as a lawyer, influenced him to go beyond precatory, nonbinding arguments in his early poems and seek resolution, such as "Oxidia is Olympia" (149). In the later poems, the intensification of both flux and his rigorous mental thought about it heartens us to accept "The full of fortune and the full of fate" (363).

Musing on the last stanza of "The Auroras," Costello hearkens to the sounds of Stevens' "hall harridan," "hushful," and "haggling" as similar to the alliteratives *h's* in *Beowulf*, which also takes place in a northern landscape ("The mother's peace is disturbed in the hall of the communal Danes when the hell-dame Grendel's mother attacks" [84]). Of the last line of "The Auroras," Costello observes, "The chiasitic 'blaze of summer straw in winter's nick' does not warm us; it is an image of consumption, with a tragic grandeur" (84). Costello concludes "Stevens' Eccentricity" with a balanced synthesis of the three sections of the chapter:

The imagination suffers its eccentricities, experiencing reality as a theater of changing scenes, of which we are both creator and audience. But from those fluctuating frames come glimpses of a boreal continuity. Landscape in Stevens is adequate, not because it captures original nature, but because it brings us into relation with a flux we cannot frame. . . . It would be for later, postmodern writers



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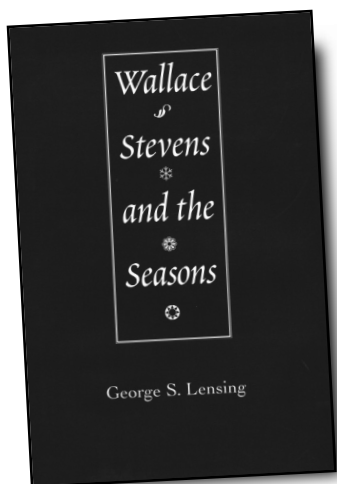
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