

The Wallace Stevens Journal

CELEBRATING WALLACE STEVENS

THE POET OF POETS IN CONNECTICUT

The year 2004 marks the 125th anniversary of the birth of Wallace Stevens, as well as the 50th anniversary of the publication of his *Collected Poems*.

On April 8 – 10, 2004, **The University of Connecticut** will host an international conference, *Celebrating Wallace Stevens: The Poet of Poets in Connecticut*.

Join us in celebrating Steven's life and poetry, examining his legacy and influence, and exploring the future of Stevens studies.

APRIL 8 – 10 2004

UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT

FEATURED PRESENTERS

Ellen Bryant Voigt 2004 Wallace Stevens Poet

Helen Vendler A. Kingsley Porter University Professor, Harvard University

Eugene Gaddis William G. DeLana Archivist, Wadsworth Atheneum

CONFIRMED SPEAKERS

Massimo Bacigalupo

Milton Bates

Charles Berger

Eleanor Cook

Bonnie Costello

Mark Doty

Alan Filreis

Roger Gilbert

Susan Howe

George Lansing

James Longenbach

J. D. McClatchy

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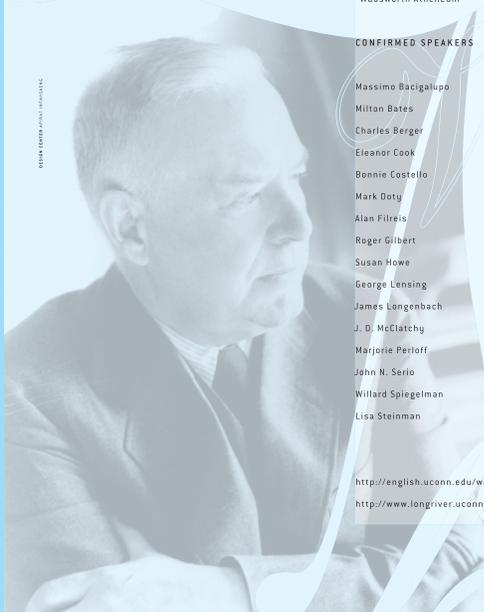
John N. Serio

Willard Spiegelman

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Special Conference Issue, Part 1

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Conference Poster

Celebrating Wallace Stevens: The Poet of Poets in Connecticut

Designed by Apirat Infahsaeng

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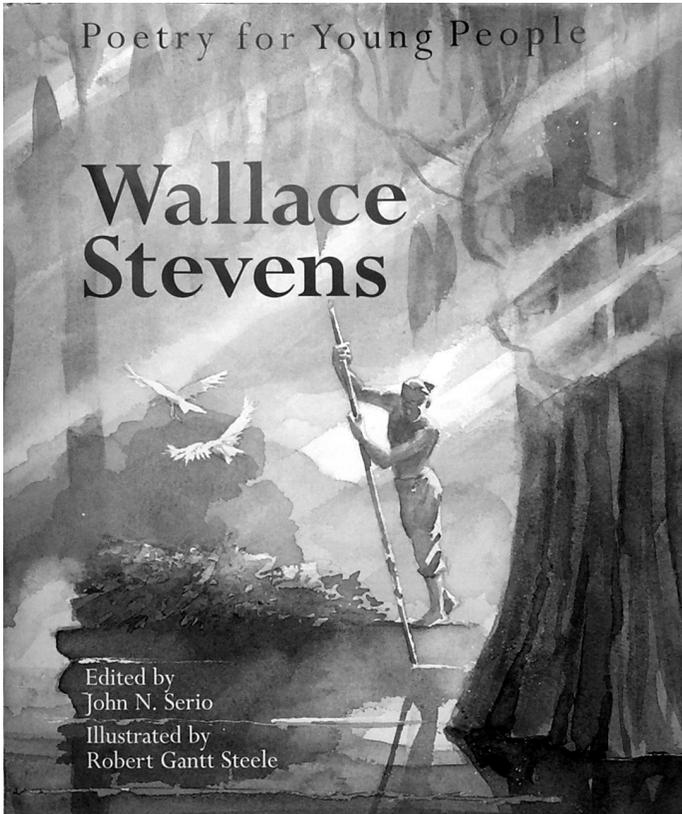
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Introduction

GLEN MACLEOD
AND
CHARLES MAHONEY

THIS TWO-PART SPECIAL issue presents the proceedings from a three-day conference organized by the Department of English at the University of Connecticut on April 8–10, 2004, *Celebrating Wallace Stevens: The Poet of Poets in Connecticut*. Designed to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the publication of Wallace Stevens' *Collected Poems*, as well as the 125th anniversary of the poet's birth, the conference brought Stevens scholars from around the world to Stevens' home state in order to examine his poetry, his life, and his legacy. Nearly fifty speakers addressed such issues as Stevens and philosophy, the place of home in Stevens' poetry, Stevens' continental inspirations, Stevensian cross-dressing, poetry and history, Stevens' verbs, and Stevens' late prosody. In addition to talks by a broad array of literary scholars, the conference included a session of contemporary American poets discussing the influence of Stevens on their work, a reading by Ellen Bryant Voigt, the keynote address by Helen Vendler, a walking tour of Stevens' Hartford led by the Hartford Friends and Enemies of Wallace Stevens, and a slide-lecture by Eugene Gaddis of the Wadsworth Atheneum.

The conference began on Thursday, April 8, with the panel "Poets on Stevens: Inquiry and Influence," moderated by Margaret Gibson and including Mark Doty, Susan Howe, James Longenbach, J. D. McClatchy, and this year's Wallace Stevens Poet, Ellen Bryant Voigt. The year 2004 marked the 41st anniversary of the University of Connecticut's Wallace Stevens Poetry Program, at which Voigt presided that evening.

The program for Friday, April 9, was organized around four plenary sessions: "New Perspectives on Stevens" (moderated by Donna Hollenberg) featured talks by Bonnie Costello, George Lensing, and Lisa Steinman; "Stevensian Language" (moderated by Charles Mahoney) was comprised of Charles Berger, Eleanor Cook, and Roger Gilbert; "Stevens and Historicism" (moderated by Glen MacLeod) presented Milton Bates, Alan Filreis, and James Longenbach; and the round-table discussion, "The *Collected Poems*: The Next Fifty Years" (moderated by Willard Spiegelman, editor, *Southwest Review*) brought together John N. Serio (editor, *The Wallace Stevens*

Journal), poet and critic Susan Howe, Massimo Bacigalupo (Italian translator of Stevens), and Christian Wiman (editor, *Poetry*). Marjorie Perloff, who was unable to attend the conference, has kindly agreed to add her voice to the discussion here.

Following the reception and conference banquet Friday evening, Helen Vendler delivered the keynote address, "Wallace Stevens: Memory, Dead and Alive." Focusing on the relatively neglected poem "Arcades of Philadelphia the Past," and on the image of lilacs in this and other poems throughout Stevens' oeuvre, Vendler constructs a career-long drama of memory and desire that gives shape to the complex and powerful emotions underlying Stevens' poetic language.

Saturday morning's program included twenty-seven papers delivered over nine panels. (The majority of these papers will appear in the Spring 2005 issue, vol. 29 no. 1, of *The Wallace Stevens Journal*.) On Saturday afternoon, conference-goers reconvened in Hartford in front of Stevens' house on Westerly Terrace for the "Wallace Stevens Walk." Led by members of the Hartford Friends and Enemies of Wallace Stevens, they retraced the two-mile route that Stevens walked every day to work, culminating in a visit to the office Stevens occupied as vice president of The Hartford.

Finally, on Saturday evening, the conference concluded at the Wadsworth Atheneum with Eugene Gaddis' slide-lecture, "Poets of Life and the Imagination: Wallace Stevens and Chick Austin." Gaddis charts the overlap of two great modernists in Hartford, the award-winning poet and the avant-garde director of the Wadsworth Atheneum. Though seemingly worlds apart in temperament, both Stevens and Austin shared the same convictions regarding the humanizing and ennobling powers of art; as Gaddis argues, "in their compulsion for self-expression, their defiant originality, and their devotion to new explorations of beauty and the imagination, [they were] very much alike." His talk also explores the influence of the Atheneum's holdings in modern art on Stevens' poetry, and the importance of the Atheneum for Stevens' daughter Holly.

The events of Saturday afternoon and evening gave conference-goers an unusual opportunity to see Stevens as "the poet of poets in Connecticut." Though readers of Stevens' poetry are generally aware of his connection to Hartford, it remains difficult—indeed, next to impossible—to place him there, even fifty years after his death. Readers of Mark Twain can visit the meticulously renovated Mark Twain House or the newly built Twain reception center on Farmington Avenue. Scholars of Harriet Beecher Stowe can tour her house as well as the Stowe-Day library next door. But those in search of Wallace Stevens will find no place that honors him—not even a plaque outside 118 Westerly Terrace. This is despite the fact that he lived and worked in Hartford from 1916 until his death in 1955, was a frequent visitor at the Atheneum, composed poetry in Elizabeth Park, and is buried in Cedar Hill Cemetery. (Though all of these sites fall within the parameters of the lavishly illustrated map of Hartford published in the

Greater Hartford Visitor's Guide, the only place his name appears is as part of The Hartford's Wallace Stevens Theater.) One of the goals of the conference was therefore to place Stevens in Connecticut not merely poetically but physically, to locate him in Connecticut beyond the resonances of the "steeple at Farmington" and the "thin men of Haddam."

This is the first major conference devoted to Stevens since 1979. Two signal events occurred in that year to mark the centenary of Stevens' birth. At the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, George Lensing organized a now-legendary conference that featured Marie Borroff, Peter Brazeau, Robert Buttel, Frank Doggett, Denis Donoghue, A. Walton Litz, J. Hillis Miller, Robert Pack, Holly Stevens, and Helen Vendler. At the University of Connecticut, the title of Wallace Stevens Poet for the centennial year was given to James Merrill, Stevens' most prominent heir and Connecticut's other great poet. We hope that *Celebrating Wallace Stevens: The Poet of Poets in Connecticut* will be remembered as a worthy tribute to Stevens in that tradition. It is with great pleasure that we present these essays from many of Stevens' most distinguished poetical and critical readers in 2004.

University of Connecticut

**Celebrating Wallace Stevens
University of Connecticut
April 8–10, 2004**



Poets on Stevens: Ellen Bryant Voigt, J. D. McClatchy, James Longenbach, Susan Howe, Mark Doty, Margaret Gibson (moderator)



Helen Vendler



Milton J. Bates, Alan Filreis, James Longenbach, Glen MacLeod



John N. Serio, Christian Wiman, Susan Howe, Willard Spiegelman, Massimo Bacigalupo, Wallace Stevens (center)

A Postcard Concerning the Nature of the Imagination

MARK DOTY

IN 1919, WALLACE STEVENS mailed a postcard from Florida to Harriet Monroe, inscribed with a working draft of one of the most beautiful sentences of modernism. Here it is:

As the immense dew of Florida
Brings forth
The big-finned palm
And green vine angering for life,

As the immense dew of Florida
Brings forth hymn and hymn
From the beholder,
Beholding all these green sides
And gold sides of green sides,

And blessed mornings,
Meet for the eye of the young alligator,
And lightning colors
So, in me, come flinging
Fruits, forms, flowers, flakes and fountains. (*Palm* 401)

By the time the poem appeared in *Harmonium* in 1923, Stevens had changed one line, the final one, but otherwise the poem remained intact. Its shape inclines me to believe that it was written on the back of a picture postcard—though it must have been in tiny handwriting indeed—in that little space provided in the box to the left of the one for the address. Of course it could have been one of those old-style postcards, with the address scrawled on the front and all the verso free for the message. But the form of the poem inclines me to think not; the length of the lines, and the three contained stanzas, suggest an external source of compression, a box to be filled in, a blank space of a certain size offered to the imagination.

This is not as trivial a matter as it seems at first glance, since this poem is entirely concerned with the relationship between the imagination and

the world. What is the source of imaginative life, from what wellsprings does it arise, and to what does it respond?

The imagination has rushed into the available white space of the post-card; it has filled the frame with a report on what has brought it to life, with an evocation of what has sparked the mind to flame.

It is landscape, the immense and thrilling otherness of the tropical or nearly so, that calls this sentence into being, setting the poem into motion. I mean the pun when I refer to the "*nature* of the imagination." But from the first word of the poem, landscape is here as part of a simile:

As the immense dew of Florida
Brings forth
The big-finned palm
And green vine angering for life. . . .

What the dew produces here is muscular and energetic; "big-finned" and "angering" are terms of vigor and ferocity, and they underline the fecundity of this dew, its power to engender life more hungry and active than that of temperate climes. This is not Shakespeare's mild, empearling dew decking the woods near Athens, or a 17th-century Metaphysical dew-drop mirroring the sphere of heaven; the Florida dew "brings forth" abundantly physical life.

But we are not allowed to linger here, because the syntax of this opening phrase pushes us onward; that "As" makes us want completion, but we will not be given it easily, since there is another stanza of comparison to come, one that begins with the same eight words:

As the immense dew of Florida
Brings forth hymn and hymn
From the beholder,
Beholding all these green sides
And gold sides of green sides. . . .

Now Stevens' attention has shifted from the dew's effect on the natural world to its effect on the perceiver, who is moved to praise and to sing. These lovely sonics seem themselves to praise and sing. The verb used for the way the world works on the beholder is exactly that used for the way the dew works on the world: it "Brings forth." The hymns are called up in us, effortlessly, spontaneously; wonder is the source of praise, the awe that is the common generating point of religious feeling and of poetry: our urge to speak back to that which is larger than ourselves, nameless; a desire to give shape to our experience of immensity.

It would be logical for a poem whose two first stanzas have begun with "As" to open its concluding movement with "So"—the ground has been thoroughly prepared, is it not time to deliver? But not yet; the speaker

here is so entirely captivated by the Florida morning in which he finds himself that he is not ready. He wants us to see that these “blessed mornings” are “Meet for the eye of the young alligator,” an image both jauntily comic and quite grave at once. What is “Meet for the eye” introduces the notion of the commensurate. The dew calls forth big and angering life; the dew calls “forth hymn and hymn / From the beholder”; the morning is splendid enough to mirror the reptilian eye that encounters it, and this dialogue of commensurate responses seems the nature of things. That which is must be answered by that which is of an equal order, an appropriate degree of splendor, beauty, or force. Stevens cannot even rest here with his delight in the Floridian; he points also to the landscape’s “lightning colors” before finally, at the opening of the penultimate line, giving us the next term in the logical proposition, the one we have been waiting for: “So.”

Here is how the last two lines appear in the poem’s final version:

So, in me, come flinging
Forms, flames, and the flakes of flames. (CP 95)

Notice first what has fallen away; no more fruit, flowers, and fountains. What emerges from the speaker—not come *forth*, mind you, but come *flinging*—is inorganic. We remain in the same alliterative track, in the chain of *f*’s but the terms now are those of the forge and the furnace: *forms, flames, flakes of flames*. How far the poem has traveled, in the arc of its extended sentence, from lush organic life to the hammering labor of a foundry that might be the very one we meet in Yeats, where Grecian goldsmiths did their work “Of hammered gold and gold enamelling” (192), making their gilded, artificial singing bird. Later, Stevens may find reality and imagination at odds, but here they are beautifully reconciled, wedded within the elegantly wrought container of a single sentence, a construction with the heft of metal. The extraordinary arc of this sentence is from the natural world right out of nature, though this movement is impelled by nature itself; it is the world’s resonant beauty that creates, triggers, or at least inflames the imagination, which has no choice but to make in response, to fling out forms.

These forms, it seems, are different from the hymns of the second stanza. Hymns are, after all, received things; one seldom sits down to write one but tends instead to draw upon the traditional lexicon of praise. And “hymn,” of course, implies praise for the maker—it does not suggest becoming a maker yourself. The position to which Stevens has been moved, in these last two lines, is quite a different one from that of the lover of beauty who, struck by the world, praises the world’s source; the artist, instead, intends to be, is required to become, a source himself. Praise, in this poem, is shouldered aside by participation; working in the great oven of form-making, standing in the shower of sparks, that is the work to which

the poet is called. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that making is the most complex form of praise. As a morning breaks outside, so a dawn takes place within the self, a light-generating act of invention.

About the title, "Nomad Exquisite": Is that an inversion of the usual order of adjective and noun, so that the phrase points us toward the exquisite perceptions of this particular traveler, who is capable of being thus struck by beauty? If so, the title might seem a bit self-mocking, a typically Stevensian ironic deflation, a means of deflecting potential self-aggrandizement—that I, the artist capable of being deeply impressed upon by reality, am called upon to produce brilliant and fiery forms. This is, after all, the poet who follows two of the most moving lines he ever wrote, from "Montrachet-le-Jardin"—

What more is there to love than I have loved?
And if there be nothing more, O bright, O bright

—with this, a line or two later,

And, hoy, the impopulous purple-plated past,
Hoy, hoy, the blue bulls kneeling down to rest. (CP 260)

It seems that the emotional directness of those first two lines mandates a sort of disappearance into the empty outcries of "hoys" and lushly alliterative verbal decor. Is this hiding, or a delight in undercutting one's own larger pronouncements?

But there is another way to read this title, too, and that is to consider "nomad" the adjective and "exquisite" the noun. Then the title points to the fugitive nature of beauty, of the moments of perception that are the genesis of art. We are not allowed to live in awe, but we do stumble upon it, or are visited by it, and that fleeting sense of immersion in the wordless world calls forth language, sending us into the furnace in which we forge our terms.

University of Houston

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———. *The Palm at the End of the Mind*. Ed. Holly Stevens. New York: Vintage, 1971.
Yeats, W. B. *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*. New York: Macmillan, 1956.

Furious Calm

SUSAN HOWE

I WILL READ THREE poems first, from a recent book of mine called *Pierce-Arrow*. I began it one winter day in Buffalo when I was house-bound after a heavy snowstorm. I had been reading some passages from the journals of Charles Sanders Peirce, also written in the dead of winter, when he and his wife were hanging on, in two rooms of Arisbe—the name they gave their decayed, unheated shingle-style mansion near the Delaware Water Gap. This is the first in the series.

C.O. Milford PA. 1904
The way bleak north
presents itself here
as Heraclitean error
driving and driving
thought and austerity
nearer to lyricism
Often as black ice (78)

These two are at the end.

I have one terror resting-
place and bridge cross to
philosophy wavering line
What rule war imagery a
zeal skeleton we catch at
Legend those lost days our
policy by theft what lamp
They do not look to love
Do you understand what

our song is do you hope
to conquer night by song

Mr. Charles Sanders Peirce
introduced "practice" and
"practical" into philosophy
As when someone planning a
journey blind-eyed solitary
prepares a lamp and fastens
linen screens and the fine
linens from that moment end
with a question of fire in
flight the word "pragmatism"
spread pleading particulars (110–11)

Wallace Stevens wrote "The Course of a Particular" in 1950. It was published in *The Hudson Review*, Spring 1951 along with "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," but omitted by accident from *The Collected Poems* in 1954.

Today the leaves cry, hanging on branches swept by wind,
Yet the nothingness of winter becomes a little less.
It is still full of icy shades and shapen snow.

The leaves cry . . . One holds off and merely hears the cry.
It is a busy cry, concerning someone else.
And though one says that one is part of everything,

There is a conflict, there is a resistance involved;
And being part is an exertion that declines:
One feels the life of that which gives life as it is.

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

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

Most critics read this as an autumn poem. For me, "The Course of a Particular" in its perfected lyric austerity represents mid-February weather in Connecticut. On late afternoon winter walks through woods and along marshes to Long Island Sound, I know that in this coldest month, as the sun declines, cold truth flares up. If there are hardly any leaves to cry in the raw wind (some brittle oak ones still do cling on resistantly like tattered camouflage, and umber and ochre bits and pieces rattle across withered grass), the general absence "in the final finding of the ear, in the thing / Itself" is audible. Smoke-drift from indoor wood stoves is another outdoor cry. So is the coldness of green. The idea that green can be cold comes to me from Thoreau, who notes pine-green coldness in winter woods and the way light *straggles*. For Stevens, "Today the leaves cry, hanging on branches swept by wind, / Yet the nothingness of winter becomes a little less. / It is still full of icy shades and *shapen* snow." *Shapen* is an obsolete past participle. This wild word relic softly and serenely concerns no one. Its pastness echoes in the sough of wind through pitch pines. "In the absence of fantasia, without meaning more."

On February 23, 1853, Thoreau noted in his journal: "I think myself in a wilder country . . . when I read in the old books which spell the word savages with an *l* (salvages), like John Smith's 'General Historie of Virginia,' etc.: reminding me of the derivation of the word from *sylova*. There is some of the wild wood and its bristling branches still left in their language" (494). On January 21, 1946, Stevens wrote to Henry Church:

During the last few weeks I have been reading a life of Conrad Weiser. . . . He became an Indian interpreter and a local hero in my part of Pennsylvania. It has been like having the past crawl out all over the place. The author has not corrected his spelling. When he speaks of pork he spells it borck. This is pure Pennsylvania German and, while it might bore anyone else to shreds, it has kept me up night after night wild with interest. (*L* 521)

Today is February 21, 2004. Out walking I experience ways in which "The Course of a Particular" locates, rescues, and delivers what is secret, wild, double, and various in the near-at-hand.

On my way home I hear a stream rushing along under ice. Maybe the nature of a particular can be understood only in relation to the course in which it flows. Maybe "The Course of a Particular" refracts one transitional season through another transitional season. Maybe the supremely fictive renders the real most real. It is twilight. I hear a first sign of spring—a low melancholy *whoo-oo, hoo, hoo, hoo*.

In 1954, Stevens published "The Dove in Spring" in *7 Arts #Two*.

Brooder, brooder, deep beneath its walls—

A small howling of the dove
Makes something of the little there,

The little and the dark, and that
In which it is and that in which
It is established. There the dove

Makes this small howling, like a thought
That howls in the mind or like a man
Who keeps searching out his identity

In that which is and is established . . . It howls
Of the great sizes of an outer bush
And the great misery of the doubt of it,

Of stripes of silver that are strips
Like slits across a space, a place
And state of being large and light.

There is this bubbling before the sun,
This howling at one's ear, too far
For daylight and too near for sleep. (*OP* 124–25)

According to William James, “Both the sensational and the relational parts of reality are dumb. They say absolutely nothing about themselves. We it is who have to speak for them” (594). This is what Stevens so wonderfully does, in these late poems. In experimental transactions with concrete particularities, he sounds the myriad shifting sensations (pre-discursive, fragmentary, unpredictable) of seemingly simple objects, weathers, hours, and events. This fluid interaction among reality, intuition, and imagination is the benevolent, relentless vitality of nature and of poetry. “One feels the life of that which gives life as it is.”

Charles Ives, another Connecticut resident and insurance executive, and Stevens' exact contemporary, in an essay written as a preface to *Sonata No. 2* (“Concord, Mass. 1840–1860”), spoke of Emerson's writings as possessing “a kind of furious calm lying deeply in the conviction of the eventual triumph of the soul and its union with God” (36). For me, Stevens' late poems possess that same “furious calm.” These moving, lyric meditations on the local and particular engage philosophical questions about reality as if from some undercurrent in the mind the ambient spirit of life flares up at a point where meaning stops and the unreality of what seems most real floods over us.

In 1951, Stevens ended a speech on receiving the gold medal from the Poetry Society of America this way:

Individual poets, whatever their imperfections may be, are driven all their lives by that inner companion of the conscience which is, after all, the genius of poetry in their hearts and minds. I speak of a companion of the conscience because to every faithful poet the faithful poem is an act of conscience.

The answer I have given to the question as to the apt locale of the genius of poetry is also the answer to the question as to the position of poetry in the world today. . . . [I]t makes itself manifest in a kind of speech that comes from secrecy. . . . It is to be found beneath the poet's word and deep within the reader's eye in those chambers in which the genius of poetry sits alone with her candle in a moving solitude. (*OP* 253)

This poem is from *The Midnight*:

Secrecy let me light you in
In shadow something other
echoed and re-echoed only

The dark who can veneer it
That conjoint abstraction will
come to snow let us go back (89)

State University at Buffalo

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Line-Endings in Wallace Stevens

JAMES LONGENBACH

WHATEVER ELSE HE IS, Stevens is one of the twentieth century's greatest makers of iambic pentameter lines; his blank verse is as distinctive as Wordsworth's or Milton's. When I was writing the poems that went into my first book, my ears were full of Stevensian pentameters, especially those of "The Owl in the Sarcophagus." Subsequently, while trying to wean myself from the sound of Stevens, I was forced to remember that Stevens is also one of the twentieth century's greatest makers of free verse lines.

Pound's free verse line is almost always ended-stopped, reinforcing moments of syntactical rest and emphasizing syntactical variation within the line. Williams ultimately embraced a line that was ruggedly enjambed, cutting against and thereby annotating the syntax with stresses it would not otherwise have. H.D. employed a line that generally parses the syntax, following the given turns of the syntax as it unfolds. Stevens employs all three of these kinds of line-endings in the same poem, creating a thrilling drama out of the infinitely variable tension between syntax and line.

Listen to the opening lines of "The Snow Man."

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

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter. . . . (CP 9)

These lines parse the poem's single sentence, confirming rather than interrupting its drive toward predication. After the semicolon at the end of the first tercet, we feel the poem beginning again, invoking the power of the first line's auxiliary verb ("must"); we are reassured to find the same kind of line-ending dividing the syntax in the same place. These endings highlight the parallel syntax, placing the infinitives "To regard" and "To behold" at the beginning of the second line of each tercet. Then, once the first two lines of the second tercet have repeated the pattern of the first

tercet, we might expect the third lines to match up as well. But here Stevens introduces an apposition ("The spruces rough in the distant glitter"), delaying the expected "Of the" until the beginning of the third tercet: "The spruces rough in the distant glitter / Of the January sun." We are thrown just slightly off balance. We are thrown further when the repetition of the infinitive ("To regard," "To behold," "to think") appears not at the beginning but at the end of the line: "Of the January sun; and not to think." At this point, the poem takes off, leaving behind the steady reassurance of the parsing line for a line that annotates the increasingly hypotactic syntax with increasingly radical enjambment.

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

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

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

(CP 9–10)

Repeated words recall the aural delight of rhyme: while the syntax rushes forward, our ears are pulled back—first by the repetition of the word "sound," then by the repetition of "wind," and finally by the repetition of the word signifying repetition itself: "same." With each reoccurrence, these words relinquish some of their semantic power. We become less confident of their meaning and more aware of their sound. We want to reconsider the earlier instance of the word, eager to understand the poem's discrimination of multiple meanings, but the syntax pushes ahead, its urgency reinforced by the increasingly radical enjambments ("the land / Full"; "beholds / Nothing"). We have heard the word "behold" earlier in the poem (matched up confidently with "regard"), but when it appears dangling at the end of the poem's penultimate line, about to introduce the poem's most discriminating repetition ("nothing" from "nothing"), it has become a different word, a word that demands a different mode of understanding: the poem's semantic conundrum has been fueled by an increasing tension between syntax and line.

I have borrowed the word "annotating" from John Hollander, who uses it to describe Miltonic enjambment. I have borrowed the word "parsing" from J. V. Cunningham, who uses it to disparage free verse in general. But preference is not the point. As "The Snow Man" demonstrates, the drama, the purpose, the thrill of a free verse prosody lie in the ability to shape the

speed and movement of a poem through the strategic use of different kinds of line-endings. Line determines our experience of a poem's temporal unfolding. Its control of intonation creates the expectation for meaningfulness, an expectation that thrills because it might be as easily thwarted as fulfilled. When the different kinds of line-endings I have examined are used in consort with one another, then all line-endings become a means of annotating syntax.

I could not have articulated this lesson without immersing myself in the sound of Stevens, though I might have discovered it by listening to Frank Bidart, John Ashbery, or especially to George Oppen, who possessed (it seems to me) the most finely calibrated ear of any writer of free verse. I could also have discovered it, for reasons Susan Howe has articulated, by listening to Emily Dickinson. But I had to work through Stevens' free verse in order to liberate myself from my earlier devotion to the sound of Stevens' blank verse.

To cast syntax into lines is to provide choices, to place precision in the service of equivocation by making us consider the implications of reading syntax in one way rather than another. So if line determines the way a sentence becomes meaningful to us in a poem, it also makes us aware of how artfully a sentence may resist itself, courting the opposite of what it says—or, more typically, something just slightly different from what it says. Writing free verse is not, as Frost once quipped, like playing tennis with the net down; it is like playing tennis on a court in which the net is in motion at the same time that the ball is in motion. But to have said so is to have discovered the limitation of the metaphor: whenever we come to the end of the line, no matter how we have gotten there, the net is never standing still.

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On Wallace Stevens

J. D. McCLATCHY

I SIMPLY COULD NOT follow the instructions given to our panel. It is not that I did not want to read a poem by Stevens, or could not find a poem of mine that had been influenced by him. In fact, I could find a whole book of them—my own first book, published nearly twenty-five years ago, and, ever since the first prideful glow had dimmed, a source of real embarrassment for me. So instead, I want to talk a little about the role of Stevens in my poetic history, but without giving you something to laugh at.

For years I lived in apartments too small for me to have a desk, so the bedroom was my study. Even now, with a proper desk at last, I still do most of my reading in bed. Perhaps for that reason I have made my bedroom into a sort of shrine. There in the pillowed, twilight gloom, a devotional halogen lamp casts a halo over the pages propped on the duvet covering my bent knees, and its light is reflected in dozens of glass frames—like ranks of votive candles—that line the walls around my bed. Behind each is a tutelary spirit. Over the years I have collected fetishes and set them around me—my lares and penates—to seep into my dreams as I sleep and stand as models while I work. In one frame I have a swatch of the Metropolitan Opera's original gold curtain; in another, a leaf from the Buddha's Bo tree in Ceylon; in another, two loops—one, snipped when she was a blond child, and the other, darker, cut from her corpse—of Emily Dickinson's hair. But most of the walls are covered with framed letters. Some are written by composers I especially admire: Ravel, Stravinsky, Rachmaninoff, Fauré. My three heroes are directly over my head, their discipline and magnanimity a constant lesson: Lincoln, Verdi, and Proust. Elsewhere are writers whose work has meant the world to me, as a reader and as a writer. There are Walt Whitman and Oscar Wilde, Alexander Pope and Ralph Waldo Emerson and Robert Frost, Colette and Mallarmé and Turgenev, Henry James and A. E. Housman and W. H. Auden. The list—and the frames—go on and on.

One of my favorites, not least because it contains both sides of an exchange, is a fan letter to Wallace Stevens, along with his reply. The letter to Stevens is dated January 13, 1934, and is from one Anna Wirtz. (In his reply, Stevens typed out her name and address. She lived in New Ha-

ven—right down the street, by coincidence, from my present-day office—so I checked an old city register in the Yale library and discovered her: Anna Wirtz indeed, a young widow working for the post office.) She had a question:

Dear Mr. Stevens,

May I take a little of your time to ask about your poem, “The Emperor of Ice Cream,” appearing in *Fifty Poets*, edited by William Rose Benét? I am uncertain as to how to interpret the poem. Do you mean that so many things in life are ugly and disillusioning and that the only sure beauty is that of “concupiscent curds” of ice cream? You speak of so many imperfect things and then place ice cream as ruler over all.

The poem puzzles me and I crave your indulgence. Does the denseness of a 26-year-old mind make the request appear less ludicrous? I do trust so. In anticipation.

Sincerely yours,
(Signed) Anna Wirtz.

Stevens replied, not on his office stationery, but in a note typed (and corrected) by himself, though with his office address typed in at the top. His tone is seigneurial.

Dear Miss Wirtz:

Some time ago I made up my mind not to explain poems, because the meaning of a poem is merely one part of it.

Of course, I never meant that ice cream is, for good and all, the *summum bonum*. If the meaning of a poem is its essential characteristic, people would be putting themselves to a lot of trouble about nothing to set the meaning in a poetic form.

Very truly yours,
(Scrawled) Wallace Stevens.

How I sympathize with Miss Wirtz! Her letter might have been my own. I was a dense eighteen-year-old when I first read “The Emperor of Ice-Cream.” It was the first poem that had ever scared me. I did not understand a word of it. Of course I was too arrogant—or afraid—to admit that, even to myself. As a high school student, I had prided myself on “understanding” (I use the quotation marks of ironic retrospection) whatever poems I had been assigned in class or had come upon on my own. Shakespeare, Keats, Frost—their acrobatic nuances yielded with study. But not Stevens. So I studied harder.

My copy of Stevens’ *Collected Poems* is the Faber edition. I bought it in Oxford during the summer of 1966—now that I think of it, just a dozen years after it was first published. The price is still penciled onto the front

endpaper: £2.50. I was in England then, enrolled at the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford-upon-Avon, and to have made the fortuitous leap from Shakespeare to Stevens is to understand at once a crucial side of Stevens' rhetoric, its heady lusters and pulsing rhythm. I remember having bought the book because of the poem that had scared Miss Wirtz and me.

A year after I bought the book, Richard Wilbur told an interviewer: "I'm sure that my enthusiasm for Stevens, circa 1948–52, had affected my own work, although I can't say just where. Of late I have found his work too undramatic, connoisseurial, and inconclusively ruminative. . . . For all his stress on the *Ding an sich*, I find him too hothouse subjective right now" (Butts 44). Wilbur's hesitations predict my own, but none of that was apparent in the first vertiginous rush of pleasure in Stevens' plush and gaudy metaphysics. As I said, I studied, to compensate for my fear. My copy is cluttered with commentary. Allusions are tracked. (Next to the poem "Gubbinal," I have written a note: "Gubbins: a contemptuous name formerly given to inhabitants of a certain district in England, said to have been absolute savages.") References to a poem in Stevens' letters are cross-indexed. Deleted stanzas restored. And reams of schoolboyish "interpretation" is supplied. (Sample, slanting up one margin: "ego in relation with responsive ego transcends alien reality"—whatever *that* is supposed to mean!) I had never read a book so intently. There were two results. First, I began to hear Stevens everywhere. Some years later, in grad school, many an evening was spent—after dinner on a tray and an ill-rolled joint—reading aloud poems by Elizabeth Bishop or John Ashbery and listening for echoes of the old man. Also, the poems I wrote myself at that time now read like thudding parodies of the Stevensian sarabande—the slow, stately manner he had of turning his back on everything. It took me some years to get that ringing out of my ears.

This was the same time, coincidentally, that I was befriended by Stevens' daughter Holly. The first time she invited me to dinner at her house in New Haven, she had cleared the table of our plates and glasses, and served cups of coffee. As I raised mine to my lips, she casually remarked, "That's the cup Dad used every morning." I can still see the tiny ripple on the coffee's surface as my hand began to tremble. That cup, suddenly transformed into the grail—would it have been a part of the scenery, among the peignoir's complacencies?

One of my teachers in college had once squired Holly Stevens around, and her father gave him a copy of his *Collected Poems* with this inscription: "Dear Elias: When I speak of the poem, or often when I speak of the poem, in this book, I mean not merely a literary form, but the brightest and most harmonious concept, or order, of life; and the references should be read with that in mind." The angelic orders of life. Though Stevens may sometimes seem like the longest distance between two points, how much more convincingly he sizes up and sings of those angelic orders than does, say, that plaster saint Rilke! Stevens' haughtiness was crucial, too, his mea-

sured authority. And in the face of it, I suppose fear should properly be a part of one's first serious literary encounter. How better get a taste for the sublime? Stevens was my Aladdin's lamp, and the auroras conjured from it first empowered my own imagination—like nothing else before or since.

But I have since come to realize why, and the truth has everything to do with a kind of apprenticeship. Long before I ever came to Yale for graduate study I had been drilled in the high Romantic tradition. Eliot and Pound and Williams had been minor figures from the start. Wallace Stevens and Hart Crane were the gods at the heart of the shrine, though Stevens had the more capacious imagination, and the steadier hand. It is no accident that my immersion in Stevens both prompted and shadowed my first serious efforts to compose poems. Here were Stevens and his poems I could neither fathom nor forget. And there was I, eager to write but with nothing to say, a wrangle of impassioned impulses without experience or ideas. It was a perfect match. If I threw the glittering fairy dust of Stevensian rhetoric in a reader's eyes, who would realize the poem was going nowhere? Decorous tercets, ducal injunctions (one line in an early poem, I wince now to put forward, goes this way: "Let there be lights and a carafe of ordinaire"), a leisurely preference for the reflection of the tree in water instead of for the tree itself, the pretense that grandiloquence was in service to simplicity or to what Stevens would have called "poverty" . . . I tried the whole bag of tricks. Not that anybody bought my tactics, but by imitating Stevens—that is to say, copying the most obvious ploys in the crudest manner—I could at least fool myself. Nowadays, I wonder to what extent Stevens himself was doing exactly the same—conjuring an unforeseen direction, or, as he once described the process, "a display of imaginative force: an effort to attain a certain reality purely by way of the artist's own vitality" (*L* 656). Think back to his reply to Miss Wirtz—to his reluctance ever to say what a poem is about, his urge to shift the discussion from a poem's content to its way of speaking.

Am I being unfair? Unfair to Stevens, certainly; and perhaps even a little unfair to myself. As a young poet I was fascinated by the contrast between the rigors of the world and the possibilities of the imagination, each dependent on the other, each triumphant over the other—very much the tyro's conundrum, very much the beginner's map of his own task and tools. So even then, the darker side of Stevens appealed to me (though, alas, at a level deep enough for me to be unable to follow him there intelligently), the snowman's nothing, the rock swept of its fictive leaves, the hard realities that are our fate and consolation.

It was only later that I found my own way—led there first by the example of Robert Lowell and later by that of W. H. Auden. It was not just that I came to prefer the poem be an arena rather than a rhapsody, but that I had accumulated enough experience and the means to examine it so that I could write directly about my own baffled life and wavering convictions in a way that I hoped would interest others. The personal life, and not just

the private—which was Stevens' domain—impelled me now to write. I wanted ideas, not abstractions. Glamour and whimsy had to be foresworn, at least as ends in themselves. What Richard Wilbur called the undramatic steadiness of Stevens' line needed to be rethought, and a more varied and flexible rhetoric employed. I stumbled away from the light—or rather, the glare—as best I could.

However in later years one reads Stevens—and for me he is primarily the poet of “The Auroras of Autumn,” the poet of death, the sweetly melancholic Brahmsian—there is no poet better suited to impress the . . . let us call him “the advanced beginner,” smart enough to recognize real brilliance but not smart enough to resist mere dazzle. At least that was true for this particular sorcerer's apprentice. It took me a long time to unweave the spell that Stevens had cast, and in fact, that *is* a poet's proper education, to escape the golden chains of the first enchanter. That it was the wizardry of Wallace Stevens and not the humbug of Pound or the skim milk of Dr. Williams meant I was lucky to have had a head start. But that it was Stevens also meant that the struggle was longer, more difficult, less decisive. His poems—the *sound* of his poems—still linger, still lurk, still beckon. I pretend to have tied myself to the mast, so I can listen and sail on by. But not at the start. Not then. I drove my ship onto the rocks thinking they were songs. Forty years later, I can truly say that I *guess* I am grateful.

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A Lifetime of Permissions

ELLEN BRYANT VOIGT

TODAY'S PREMISE RESTS on risky presumptions: that the poets gathered here—Mark Doty, Susan Howe, James Longenbach, J. D. McClatchy, and I—will (1) have recognized the influence of the designated elder, and (2) be willing to point it out in public. But the risks diminish when the elder is Wallace Stevens—witness the aesthetic diversity of this panel. His work sits at the middle of the past century like some monolithic American Arc de Triomphe, around which so many avenues cluster, swirl, and then diverge. One need only think less about *influence*, of the old kill-the-father sort, than about *permission*, the attraction of like temperaments. Listen to this passage:

Childhood, once vast with terrors and surprises,
Is fading to a landscape deep with distance—
And always the sad piano in the distance,

Faintly in the distance, a ghostly tinkling
(O indecipherable blurred harmonies)
Or some far horn repeating over water
Its high lost note. . . .¹

Certainly Stevensian, with its “parsed” line (James Longenbach’s useful term), lexical repetition, and elevated diction. But written by Donald Justice, who was born in 1925. Or this, with its dominant long vowels and Stevens’ shorter line:

Think of the jungle,
The green steam rising.

It is yours.
You are the prince of Paraguay.

Your minions kneel
Deep in the shade of giant leaves

As you drive by
Benevolent as gold.²

That is Justice's student, Mark Strand, a decade younger. Or this, with Stevens' characteristic mixture of the abstract and the sensually concrete, from my own generation:

Public sorrow, the acquired
gold of the leaf, the falling off,
the prefigured burning of the yield:
which is accomplished. At the lake's edge,
the metal pails are full vats of fire.
So waste is elevated
into beauty. And the scattered dead
unite in one consuming vision of order.³

That is Louise Glück. The point is not an exact correspondence to Stevens' music, despite the echoes, but instead a commitment to *sonority*—aesthetic ground that a poet, over a life's work, might usefully elaborate and affirm (as Justice did), or disguise and complicate (as Strand has done), or even move away from (as Glück seems to be doing increasingly).

The other polestar is Williams ("No ideas but in things" [6], remember), and the opposing claim on voice and style illuminates another part of Stevens' legacy: relish of artifice. More than relish: a deep belief that artifice—the making of the thing—may be all we know on earth and all we need to know. Thus an attendant fearlessness about foregrounding all manner of poetic means.

This I do hereby confess: often I spend the better part of my waking hours—not only at my desk but stopped at the stoplight, stirring the stir-fry, or as a blank blanketed for elusive sleep—spend it deciding for, then against, then for, an obvious alliteration or repetition, a Latinate word, a reversed foot. But for me, an even more important permission, or lesson, or legacy, has been Stevens' use of overt, often elaborate formal apparatus *not* in support of a poem's structure, as with other modernist application of sequence and juxtaposition (and as Brooks and Warren thought we should), but in counterpoint against it.

"Peter Quince at the Clavier" is the paradigm. The poem's four numbered parts have been deliberately made distinct from each other and self-contained. The first is composed in five, mostly open, tercets, in steady tetrameter, diminishing loose end-rhyme draped over the stanzas. The second part shifts to strong but unpredictable patches of alternating rhyme deployed with end-stopped closed stanzas of uneven lengths; the lineation is also uneven, subdividing the syntactical trimeter ("In the *cool* / Of *spent emotions*," "The *dew* / Of *old devotions*") or reinforcing it ("She *felt*, among the *leaves*," "She *walked upon* the *grass*" [CP 90–91; emphasis added]).

Part III provides strict, closed, tetrameter couplets, rhyming them on three long vowels (EE, I, A). Part IV recombines the earlier elements, subsuming paired and alternating rhymes into a larger musical context that includes x lines (variations in a rhyme scheme such as abxb or abbx), that sometimes extends tetrameter another foot, that echoes the couplets one to another (“portal . . . choral, scenting . . . strings . . . scraping”), that diverts them with internal rhyme (“immortality . . . memory, plays . . . makes”) and direct refrain (“So . . . So . . . So . . .” [CP 91–92]), and that returns us to a reformulation of the initial three-line sentence inside a sectional frame:

Beauty is momentary in the mind—
 The fitful tracing of a portal;
 But in the flesh it is immortal.

 Now, in its immortality, it plays
 On the clear viol of her memory,
 And makes a constant sacrament of praise. (CP 91–92)

With more time, we could unpack other sorts of purposeful, foregrounded artifice, like the shifts in the central figure, from keyboard to strings in part I, to the cymbal and horns in II, to the simpering tambourines in III, to strings again in IV—but you can hear such choices at work. Four distinct units, each one formally coherent, cohesive, and complete.

The poem’s structure, however, is *tripartite*, the structure of the sonata: exposition, development, and recapitulation. The exposition occurs succinctly in the first seven-and-a-half lines, laying out the premise of an argument that opens in analog—“Just as . . . so . . .”—preparing for the primary *motif*: “Music is feeling, then, not sound.” And if x, then y: “thus it is that what I feel, / . . . Is music” (CP 90). And we get the clearest glimmer of the shadow subject: desire for the absent, silk-clad beloved.

Here—exactly halfway through the first numbered part, the first tightly woven formal installation—the development section begins. Like passionate argument, it brings evidence by example. The transition is another comparison: “what I feel, / . . . is like the strain / Waked in the elders” (CP 90). The evidence itself is a story, a condensed narrative of unsolicited desire, which unfolds over forty-three lines and two-and-a-half of those distinct formal installments.

As Part III ends, in framing, mirrored rhymes (*tambourines/Byzantines*), the narrative action—the development section—also ends, although the story itself does not: it is simply set aside for the recapitulation. That move, back to initial motif and premise, is signaled—as surely as a composer’s reassertion of the tonic—by an initial, rhymed, syntactical tercet:

Beauty is momentary in the mind—

The fitful tracing of a portal;
But in the flesh it is immortal.

Quickly, the refrain drives us through the logical extensions, each larger in scope, duration and consequence: “So evenings die . . . So gardens die . . . So maidens die.” Now Susanna’s story, the developmental focus and our *prima facie* case, will return for its conclusion: heard music, escaping its listeners and their designs, “plays / On the clear viol of . . . memory,” no longer the plucked “pizzicati” of the speaker’s or the elders’ lust but the drawn bow of the long-voweled, sonorous pentameter in the last line: “And makes a constant sacrament of praise” (CP 92).

A lifetime of permissions, lessons I have explored in my own work, particularly my last three books—*Shadow of Heaven*, *Kyrie*, and *Two Trees*—the middle of which, *Kyrie*, is a book-length poem that sets overt form (loose sonnet) against the structure of an ongoing illustrative narrative (the 1918 Influenza pandemic). There will be lots of examples at my reading tonight,⁴ so I need not supply one now. But here is a checklist:

- juxtaposition of distinct formal pieces, like mosaic tiles;
- management of form in counterpoint with structure;
- use of narrative as evidence within the structure of argument;
- presentation of narrative as analog or figure;
- permission to background—even occlude—the personal, lyric occasion that pricked the poet into poetry.

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Notes

¹ Donald Justice, “Nostalgia of the Lakefronts,” 160.

² Mark Strand, “What to Think Of,” 26.

³ Louise Glück, “Autumnal,” 37.

⁴ Ellen Bryant Voigt was honored as the 41st Annual Wallace Stevens Poet, University of Connecticut, 2004. [*Editors’ note.*]

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Planets on Tables: Stevens, Still Life, and the World

BONNIE COSTELLO

BY THE THIRTIES, many artists were beginning to recalibrate their sense of space, seeking an intimate, human scale of objects and relations in a world experienced as chaotic and against the outsized ambitions of the public realm. Modernity's expanded and fragmented space, its skyscrapers, its giant silver screens, its impersonal forces of capitalism and of the state, had evacuated the realm of the personal. But there was no returning to detached privacy or inviolate inwardness. As W. H. Auden put it, "The glacier knocks in the cupboard, / . . . And the crack in the teacup opens / A lane to the land of the dead" (115). Rather than retreat, some artists and writers sought to create tentative, partial spaces of order and beauty that might provide a conduit to the world without annihilating the personal.

I want to explore this idea in connection with Wallace Stevens' turn to the genre of still life in *Parts of a World*. Stevens ends this 1942 volume with an unusual prose comment that directly addresses the experience of scale in the pressure of a world at war. I quote just a few sentences of this two-paragraph passage:

The *immense* poetry of war and the poetry of a work of the imagination are two different things. . . . [T]he poetry of war as a consciousness of the victories and defeats of nations, is a consciousness of fact, but of heroic fact, of fact on such a *scale* that the mere consciousness of it affects the scale of one's thinking and constitutes a participating in the heroic. (*OP* 241–42; emphasis added)

Stevens goes on to acknowledge that "in recent times . . . everything tends to become real, or, rather that everything moves in the direction of reality" (*OP* 242). But the work of the imagination in its "struggle with fact" is to come back to fact "not to what it was" but to "what we wanted fact to be" (*OP* 242). This distinction helps to explain why the poems in the volume to which this is a conclusion resist mimesis or even sensory engagement. But it does *not* explain why so many of them are still lifes—

meditations on small-scale decorative and domestic objects. One would expect a volume concerned with heroic fact to choose history or at least portraiture as its genre. What have these pears, these pink and white carnations, these bottles and sundries of the bourgeois table to do with “the immense poetry of war”? The shallow space of still life might suggest a poet nourishing himself on the sweets of art for art’s sake while the Depression-era world tears itself to pieces in the quest for bread.

Glen MacLeod reads the volume progressively, distinguishing Stevens’ late-1930s interest in still life as part of his attention to “the common” and the everyday, soon to be redirected to images of war and the heroic. But the concern for a broken world beyond the domestic one is already present. As Stevens remarked in 1936, “We are preoccupied by events even when we do not observe them closely” (qtd. in Filreis 10). MacLeod reveals this, in fact, in his discussion of “Dry Loaf,” which he connects to Miro and the Spanish Civil War. These poems do not isolate a purely aesthetic space, a mere poetry of the imagination, or a phenomenology of things. Nor do they approach the common objects of the table as domestic ephemera. I wish to show how “the immense poetry of war” and the call to “heroic consciousness” enter into Stevens’ art of “the common” in still life, without reconstituting the gigantic that troubles him. (Lisa Steinman’s paper on Stevens cross-dressing seems relevant here, since traditionally still life is a feminine space and war a masculine theater.) More than landscape or portraiture, still life is a threshold genre, between nature and culture, vital and morbid, private and public worlds. Indeed, in choosing still life Stevens insists on preserving an individual human scale of contemplation, a sense of the personal and the intimate with its accompanying desires; but he presents this as a struggle for tentative, partial experiences of order and beauty always involved in a greater reality that gives them vitality and refuses them stability. In this way Stevens’ still life brings the splintered planet to the table.

In *Parts of a World*, as Eleanor Cook has shown, Stevens casts synecdoche into doubt. Part/whole relations are unresolved; the personal seems broken from, or crushed by, external events. Still life’s rhopography (trash, waste) of everyday domestic living (“Complacencies of the peignoir, late coffee and oranges” [CP 66]) is not easily transfigured to megalography, the heroic or the numinous. Indeed, this volume contains “The Man on the Dump,” which subjects still life’s personal arrangements and vain displays (the “bouquets,” “the box / From Esthonia,” “the tiger chest, for tea” (CP 201) to the law of entropy and the collapse of cultural orders. The aficionado of the dump (modeled on a Russian refugee who had set up quarters in the dump below Stevens’ house [L 266 n]) makes a stark contrast to Pope’s Belinda of “The Rape of the Lock,” the very visible priestess of empire’s vanity table, for whom “the various offerings of the world” (line 130) are displayed. But if the dump is still life’s destiny, it is not still life’s only function. Stevens responds to a world torn in pieces, and he

struggles within the still life aesthetic to achieve heroic consciousness that responds to fact but might imagine and therefore bring fact toward "what we want it to be" (OP 242).

Susan Stewart, in her book *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, has associated still life with "the disease of nostalgia." "Whereas still life speaks to the cultural organization of the material world, it does so by concealing history and temporality; it engages in an illusion of timelessness. The message of the still life is that nothing changes; the instant described will remain as it is in the eye of the beholder, the individual perceiving subject" (29). (Is illusion always bad? One thinks of the memorial function of objects in W. S. Sebald, Vladimir Nabokov, and Walter Benjamin.) Norman Bryson echoes Stewart when he asserts in *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, "still life is the world minus its narrative, or better, the world minus its capacity for generating narrative interest" (60). But Stevens' lyric poems reinscribe narrative interest, not in material histories of arranged objects (who grew or arranged the pears we are studying?), but in dramas of contemplation that enact a fall into history, or gestures of disruption and assembly that represent the contingencies of form. His are performative, not constative, still lifes. Stevens is certainly tempted by the seductions of the still moment, and his great subject is desire as it is aroused by the sensuous world he seeks to preserve and make personal, but by giving voice to the consciousness that yearns for this plenitude he exposes the troubled, restless state that surrounds still life's orders.

In "A Dish of Peaches in Russia," for instance, Stevens evokes still life's utopia of consumption and its myth of presence. But the window in the poem opens out from this shallow space. Before we are at the end of the second line, the spell has been broken and we enter a story of exile. The speaker who tastes, smells, and sees the peaches does not inhabit the dwelling "where they are" (CP 224); his nearly erotic desire is denied consumption. Is the word "exile" here merely a trope for a state of mind, or is the poem also an act of sympathetic imagination? Stevens writes in "Dry Loaf," "It is equal to living in a tragic land / To live in a tragic time" (CP 199). Through the double reference to Russia, the metaphoric exile of thought from integral being becomes linked, perhaps, to actual exile under Stalinist terror. (And is that box from Esthonia that ends up on the dump itself a casualty of these times?) The still life image evokes nostalgia in the I-as-Russian for "the colors of my village / And of fair weather, summer, dew and peace" (CP 224).

Like many modern American poets, Stevens believed that the imagination was fundamentally nurtured by place and that the best art came from local soil. But he was surrounded by émigrés, and the news coming out of Europe was all about pogroms, invasions, and displacements. One feels this historical pressure against the other examples of indigenous feeling in the poem. The "black Spaniard plays his guitar" (CP 224) against a back-

ground of civil war (and just a few years before, as Stevens might have known, Lorca, poet of the gypsy guitarists, had been murdered by Franco's henchmen); the Angevine absorbs Anjou (and studies pears?) as Germany threatens France. Admittedly, *these* experiences of displacement are not enacted in the poem, but the Russian's condition of exile exposes all the other indigenes to the vagaries of history. Into the window of reverie come the "ferocities" of modern class and national conflict; these are not just pressures from without: for the poet imagining exile they become pressures from within that "tear / One self from another" (CP 224). I am not suggesting that these poems are "about" specific historical phenomena any more than they are realistic descriptions of still life objects; nor can we see these historical references as a "ruse," as Sarah Riggs suggests, in the game of poetic self-circulation (6). Rather, the vibrations of history disturb the meditative space and its solid objects. Still life evolves, paradoxically, into a scene of profound dynamism and instability.

The movement of "The Glass of Water" is the reverse of "A Dish of Peaches in Russia." Shifting center to periphery, the poem moves from the "here" of poetic meditation to the "here" of locality and history, a move always mediated by "ideas." But in a sense the space of still life and the space of real life (read as *parergon* and *ergon*) have converged in the poem. The poem is difficult to follow and this is deliberate; the language imitates this logic of increasing density and opacity.

What could arouse a fuller image of composure, purity, reflection, refreshment, and containment than a poem entitled "The Glass of Water"? Yet Stevens is restive in such romantic tenements. The poem explores violent refraction of the metaphysical and moves toward formless being. The center shifts first from the metaphysical to the mental and textual, and ultimately to the material. But from the outset it also posits the physical and the metaphysical as indeterminate, *metamorphic* conditions, not only polar to each other, but also containing dynamic polarities within themselves. Neither the glass of water nor its metaphysical type is a transparent center, but only a swirl of parts that do not make a whole, a flux of states without equilibrium where container dissolves into the contained:

That the glass would melt in heat,
That the water would freeze in cold,
Shows that this object is merely a state,
One of many, between two poles. So,
In the metaphysical, there are these poles. (CP 197)

The opening thought in this poem is stimulated by still life's formal play of shapes and textures. Stevens also exploits the genre's iconographic potential. MacLeod reads the poem persuasively as an ekphrasis, claiming that the inventive line "Light / Is the lion that comes down to drink" (CP 197) derives from the lion image etched on a Netherlandish goblet

Stevens saw reproduced in an art magazine. Whatever its source, the lion in Stevens signifies sublime natural energy, which makes objects visible (the sun), and poetic will, the light of the mind, which transforms objects. Is there a logos or even a foundational center to all this metamorphosis? "Here in the centre stands the glass." "Here"—at the opening of stanza two, or in the metaphysical realm, or in a referential space? The imagery and the syntax (in this ten-line sentence) tell us we are not indigenes of any center. Violence breaks out as the metaphysical breaks down. The lion stirs the water: "Ruddy are his eyes and ruddy are his claws / When light comes down to wet his frothy jaws." The contemplative "pool" is obscured by "winding weeds" of reflection and "the refractions, / The *metaphysica*, the plastic parts of poems / Crash in the mind" (CP 197).

Is this violence of *Parts of a World* a sign of the "heroic consciousness" that brings the imagination and the personal into relation with "the immense poetry of war"? As the weeds get thicker the "here" shifts from the glass to "the centre of our lives" (CP 198) (to the imagination of fact), but our lives are not centered in contemporary history; the center is moving. (And the center is also eventually shared, not a private space any longer but a public space, a village.) The end of the poem confirms that the "*poles*" and "*states*" of physics and metaphysics referred to at the beginning take shape for the poet within the worldly struggle of *politics* and *statehood*.

The language of the last stanza moves us out of the still life environment and the mind's *metaphysica*. We enter a realm of contending ideologies and manipulations (or negligence?) of "politicians / Playing cards" on down to a condition of low-plane reality: opaque, disorganized, undifferentiated materiality and waste of "dogs and dung." But for Stevens this new centering is less a change of realms than a shift from figure to ground, of there becoming here:

here in the centre, not the glass,

But in the centre of our lives, this time, this day,
It is a state, this spring among the politicians
Playing cards. In a village of the indigenes,
One would have still to discover. Among the dogs
and dung,
One would continue to contend with one's ideas.
(CP 197-98)

Although there is nothing of the "heroic" in the world of dogs and dung, the last line is not only a mode of participation in the heroic in the very urge to move in the direction of reality but also of "what we want fact to be," a relation of center and periphery. Stevens has not chosen the path of modernist still life abstraction that, as Norman Bryson says, "takes mun-

dane reality only as its starting point" (86). The still life environment participates in the struggle that takes on meaning in history.

Historical change becomes thematically central in "Cuisine Bourgeoise." A transition between one order and another produces the grotesque and the poem conveys its horror. Here Stevens experiments with the *vanitas* mode of still life; skulls (or at least severed human heads) occupy the space of the table because we have turned in on ourselves; we have yet to harvest anything new. "These days of disinheritance . . ."

We feast on human heads, brought in on leaves,
Crowned with the first, cold buds. On these we live,
No longer on the ancient cake of seed,
The almond and deep fruit. (CP 227–28)

Biblical story echoes in this poem not just as a lost coherence but for its analogies to modern times. The "ancient cake of seed" suggests the loss of ancestral (Judeo-Christian?) tradition. The poem was most likely inspired by Cranach's painting *The Feast of Herod*, which Chick Austin had recently acquired for the Hartford Wadsworth Atheneum in 1936. Courtiers sit around a table set with plates and knives, ready to consume the head of John the Baptist, as servants bring in a plate full of grapes and other fruits and nuts. The line "The words are written, though not yet said" (CP 227) suggests the writing on the wall at Belshazzar's Feast. These allusions hint that this modern crisis is a reverberation of earlier cultural transformations. War is a time of negations rather than beliefs, and a time of cultural self-consumption, when the "table [is] a mirror" (another *vanitas* image) and not yet a setting of completely new objects; the "first cold buds" at this point simply add to the grotesque effect of this anti-pastoral. The cultural harvest has no fresh taste of reality.

As we have seen, the movement of most of these poems is negative; violence and uncertainty enter the tranquil space of still life. Dry loaves and skulls displace the abundant table. But *Parts of a World* also affirms: "After the final no there comes a yes / And on that yes the future world depends" (CP 247). "Woman Looking at a Vase of Flowers," despite the title's invitation to indolent pleasure, starts with the violence and thunder of "crude / And jealous grandeurs of sun and sky" (CP 246), shattering into parts and scattering into low plane reality. Although the poem makes no overt reference to contemporary history, it does evoke conflict and imagine a peace, a tentative gathering, such as we "want reality to be." The parts of the world do not leave winding weeds or dirty water this time. This storm of secondary things is a summer storm. And as things "Escape[]" their "large abstraction" and enter the visible world of particulars, they can be gathered into still life's "human conciliations" (CP 246–47). A space of affirmation gets established that is not restrictive or authoritarian. Here, for the woman looking, things "fell / Into place beside her" (CP

247). Stevens offers an image of momentary conciliation in a time of worldly conflict and stress. The bouquet does not inspire a clairvoyance of original grandeurs (a transparent metaphysical center), but it does invite "A profounder reconciling" of "The crude and jealous formlessness" with the human need for intimate arrangement. In this way "Woman Looking at a Vase of Flowers" takes the floral still life as an emblem for the role and nature of lyric poetry with what might be termed its "flowers of speech." Here I allude to the broader analogy that Stevens points to between still life and lyric—both arranging objects in sensuous and semantic orders, both celebrating the everyday. The woman's looking has none of that Sunday Morning complacency; her human arrangement of the flowers has the force of epiphany.

The *gathering* or *swarm* as a solution to the fragmentation of *parts*, and an alternative to the oppressive reduction of many to one, emerges often in Stevens' late poems. The local transient arrangements of still life become models of human conciliation with total reality. In *Harmonium* Stevens made the planet his table, taking dominion with a jar. *Parts of a World*, we saw, presents embattled private orders that can tear one self from another. But late Stevens brings everybody's world buzzing to local objects; still life becomes associated with plurality and community; its arrangements convey hospitality. The necessary angel, the *numen* of Tal Coat's simple still life of pots and bowls, is surrounded by paysans and at the same time hovers at the welcoming door. She is a figure of both center and periphery, the heroic and the common, megalography and rhopography.

Within the private space of still life, Stevens recognizes in "The Bouquet," as he says in "Someone Puts a Pineapple Together," that "truth [is] not the respect of one, / But always of many" (NA 85). Objects poised ("on a table at a window / Of the land, on a checkered cover, red and white" [CP 450]), whether book or pineapple, are things of the sun and "para-things" (CP 448), funds of metaphor through which parts evoke a larger world. But the violence within, the "lightning in an inner world" (CP 448), corresponds to an outer violence that the poet cannot order. After four long cantos of rapt attention in "The Bouquet," Stevens abandons the space of still life to the pressure of a world not yet formed to community. The "soldiers" of the poems of the 1930s, who were "Marching and marching in a tragic time" (CP 200), are apparently still on the move. In brutally matter-of-fact, clipped syntax, utterly unlike the delightful tangents of meta-men and para-things that precede it, Stevens relinquishes the bouquet:

A car drives up. A soldier, an officer,
Steps out. He rings and knocks. The door is not locked.
He enters the room and calls. No one is there.
He bumps the table. The bouquet falls on its side.

He walks through the house, looks round him and then
leaves.
The bouquet has slopped over the edge and lies on the
floor. (CP 452–53)

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Wallace Stevens and the Curious Case of British Resistance

GEORGE S. LENSING

I N 1980, I PUBLISHED an essay entitled “Wallace Stevens in England” in which I laid out some of the publishing history of Wallace Stevens’ poetry in that country—a somewhat complicated narrative that included the publication in 1952 of a pirated edition of his poems followed a few months later by a legally sanctioned edition of his *Selected Poems*. The pirated edition (also called *Selected Poems*) was suppressed and its copies confiscated; the other edition was published by Faber and Faber with the aid of T. S. Eliot and Marianne Moore. Up to that time, Stevens’ poetry was almost totally unknown in that country. When I was preparing the essay, Peter du Sautoy, chairman of Faber and Faber, who had helped to bring about the publication of Faber’s *Selected Poems*, reported that, while sales on the whole had been slow at first, the publication of a paperback edition of that collection in 1965 had lent a wider accessibility to the poet’s work and, as he reported to me, sales “really took off.”¹ I ended my essay on that rather encouraging datum.

Now, from a perspective of a quarter-century later, I find my optimism overstated. It is certainly the case that Stevens has become better known in the United Kingdom and in Ireland, especially among the poets themselves. However, in the colleges and universities and among general readers, Stevens continues to remain widely unknown—especially in comparison with major American modernists such as Eliot, Pound, Frost, Williams, and others. Why is this the case?

With the endorsement of Eliot and other poets and critics following the publication of *Selected Poems*, one might have expected that Stevens’ “discovery” there would lead to a dramatic growth of interest among his new readers. After all, with the poems now at hand, there was nothing left to do but read them. Faber and Faber has kept the *Selected Poems* and *Collected Poems* in print to the present time, and a separate edition of *Harmonium* was added to their lists in 2001. John Bodley of Faber and Faber writes, perhaps rather pleadingly, in 2001, “We can’t provide sales figures I’m afraid, but there is no question that for English readers Stevens, in all his richness and variety, remains one of the glories of modern poetry.”²

One of the most perceptive of Stevens' early British readers was A. Alvarez. His influential book, *The Shaping Spirit*, appeared in 1958 and included a chapter on Stevens. The essay began with acclaim: "Eliot apart, Stevens is the most perfectly finished poet America has turned out. . . . He might very easily have been a worse poet. It is hard to see that he could have been any better." Nonetheless, Alvarez admits to "hesitations" and perceives unevenness. The invariable label of "dandyism" emerges when discussing "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" (124, 138, 135). In fact, that appellation had already taken on a certain notoriety.

It was the American critic Gorham Munson who promulgated this term in his 1925 essay "The Dandyism of Wallace Stevens." In this provocative and influential appraisal, he found in Stevens' poetry the "lightness and coolness and transparency of French," and "the discipline of one who is a connoisseur of the senses and the emotions." Removed from historical concerns, Stevens seems to "sit comfortably" and "to be conscious of no need of fighting the times" (42, 43). Munson's own observations were confined, of course, to the poems of the recently published *Harmonium*, but the term "dandyism" quickly gained a currency that would be applied to the later volumes as well and that would become for many years a touchstone label for American as well as British critics.

Alvarez himself found that in the weaker poems of Stevens a point "with Stevens, and he reaches it often, at which profundity becomes blurred with rhetoric." His indictment then becomes more sweeping: "It is a poetry of irritation. He seems to be continually baffled by the impossibility of describing anything at all with finality. A motion of the wrist, the slightest variation in light or in the mood of the observer, and the object is utterly different. The impossible endlessness of observation, then, is Stevens's creative premiss" (134, 129).

Here Alvarez lays out the objections that would inform numerous iterations among the poet's British critics: a surface dazzle in vocabulary and image that seemed to belong more to the French tradition than the British or American; a poetry that preferred thirteen ways of viewing the world to a single and final one; an aloof, ironical and dispassionate voice that played whimsically, teasingly, and often obscurely with ideas. Unlike Stevens' American critics in the decades following the poet's death, many of his British critics seemed to have little interest in taking the poet beyond such a ready reduction. His critics might recognize an extraordinary poetic talent, but often relegated that talent to superfluity and irrelevance.

John Malcolm Brinnin, in an interview given eighteen years after the Alvarez book, also found that British readers saw Stevens more in the tradition of the French than the American: "To go to England and talk about Wallace Stevens as I did was to go to the Sahara. They didn't know about him, didn't want to. This was not an American poet; this was a sophisticate out of Paris and other nefarious influences" (Brazeau 194).

Allied to the idea of dandyism was something that might be called American dilettantism. How, his British readers wondered, could a businessman be taken seriously as a poet, especially if he was a successful and apparently wealthy businessman? Stevens was not even a man-of-letters but an insurance executive who settled the claims of surety bonds. Surely only Americans could breed such an unlikely contradiction, and to take seriously a poet from such a background seemed not just improbable but slightly preposterous.

A third reason for regarding Stevens with suspicion had to do with the rather loose but negative association of the poet with dominant figures of American modernism such as Eliot, Pound, Crane, the early Lowell, and others. To many, the dislodgments of poetry from traditional forms and the radical innovations of style, the incongruous juxtapositions of images and allusions, and the defiant turn upon English romanticism by these poets targeted American modernists as unified agents of poetic eccentricity and deviants from the sanctioned British tradition. Stevens himself once remarked in a letter "The English insist that Americans have no background" (L 614). As Lee M. Jenkins has noted, when Stevens was published in England at mid-century, it was "a time when the 'Movement,' with its suspicion of modernism, its 'Englishness,' its stance in favour of the purity of English diction and plain speech, held sway in British poetry" (2). Carolyn Masel agrees that poets such as Philip Larkin and John Betjeman satisfied a British "preference for realism, especially autobiographically based work" (134), while Stevens' poetry seemed antithetical to that. Many of these biases among English readers seem to have lingered into the twenty-first century.

British and Irish poets share with the critics a similar ambivalence toward Stevens. Few seem to know his work comprehensively well, but well enough to take notice of his merits and considerable importance as a modernist. He cannot, they note, be ignored and, indeed, there is much to praise. But it is the *dandyish* Stevens, the *Frenchified* Stevens, and especially the *obscure* Stevens that often bewilders and even exasperates many of them.

As early as 1929, Laura Riding and Robert Graves, with only *Harmonium* as their specimen, pointed in passing to a "frivolousness" and, placing Stevens in association with Aldington, Pound, and Williams, found them guilty of "parasitical inter-imitativeness" (166, 216). In his *W. H. Auden, A Commentary*, John Fuller, in his discussion of Auden's poem "In Praise of Limestone," reproduces a piece of doggerel that Auden privately sent to Ursula Niebuhr in 1947 but never otherwise published. The seven lines went through several versions, but here is the draft that Auden sent to her—entitled "Miss God on Mr. Stevens":

Dear, O dear. More heresy to muzzle.
No sooner have we buried in peace
The flightier divinities of Greece,

Than up there pops the barbarian with
An antimythological myth,
Calling the sun, the sun,
His mind "Puzzle." (408)

Auden seems to be referring to the first canto of the recently published "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," in which Stevens ambiguously presents the sun, declaring that it "Must bear no name" (*CP* 381) other than to be itself. In any case, Auden's Stevens is jokingly presented as a maker of "heresy" who must be muzzled. The "flightier divinities of Greece" have been discarded but Stevens has imposed his own "antimythological myth" in "Calling the sun, the sun." Sun replaces a divinity such as Apollo but in so doing installs a new myth, a pure abstraction of reality. Renouncing the flighty, this myth enshrines the bare and the banal. In any case, Stevens' mind is finally a "'Puzzle,'" as if to say, "Who can say what the Stevens myth is anyway?"

Ted Hughes, acknowledging Stevens' influence on Sylvia Plath, found the American poet's work an enthusiasm he could not share with his wife: "He was a kind of god to her, while I could never see anything at all in him except magniloquence" (Fass 210). Roy Fisher, committed to the presentation of "fictive things" in his own poetry, apparently found Stevens' own poetic fictions too airy: "At the same time I don't want ever to go over into an elaborated set of fictions like Wallace Stevens's, I'd not find that congenial" (Rasula and Erwin 32). As recently as 1996, James Fenton found Stevens excessively happy: "Unhappiness . . . seems to be a colour missing from Stevens's palette." Fenton is "not sure" he can "believe in a happiness in the absence of unhappiness" (16).

Other poets have been more generous in their praise. Perhaps most lavish in his commendation was the Scottish poet Hugh MacDiarmid. In reviewing *Harmonium* in 1924, he found only adulation: "We have absolute faith in Mr. Stevens's perseverance, and in his ultimate success. But in the meantime we are more than content that his incessant efforts should continue. They provide a spectacle unique in contemporary literature—a series of unparalleled efforts, conceived with an adroitness that borders on the miraculous" (178). MacDiarmid's fellow Scot, the poet Norman MacCaig, later acknowledged Stevens as one of the two "discernible"⁷³ influences in his own poetry.

The English poet who is first on the lips of everyone in making a connection with Stevens is Charles Tomlinson. Donald Davie, for example, has noted: "In *The Necklace*, Tomlinson's second collection [1955] but the first where his writing is assured, everyone acknowledges the presence of Wallace Stevens" (4). The tone and style of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" are evident, for example, in Tomlinson's "Nine Variations in a Chinese Water Setting," or, as Tomlinson has stated in reference to his poem "The Art of Poetry," "I was also arguing with one of my mentors [Stevens]

and with a certain aspect of his elegance [in "The Snow Man"]. . . ." It was Stevens and Marianne Moore, he added, "who saved me from the Dylan Thomas infection" (25–26).

The poet David Gascoyne composed his "With a Cornet of Winkles" as both a tribute to Wallace Stevens and, as the poem itself confesses, "this perfectly awful attempt at a parody." The difficulty of enjoying the parody when the object of the parody (Stevens' verse) was largely unknown by Gascoyne's British readers at mid-century accounts perhaps for the poem's deliberately overinflated style. The poem begins:

O bravo! For a maladif, mandarin-miened, mauve
melody-man
With a glittering, lissome, pat-prattling lute—
Que c'est beau! as he lo! hums and haws,

And soon again haws, then heigh-ho! how he hums
And whilom most becomingly strums
On his poignantly Quince-flavoured lute! (174)

"Rage for Order," a forty-line poem by the Northern Irish poet Derek Mahon, is an aggressive response to "The Idea of Order at Key West." The poem calls Stevens' work "a dying art, / An eddy of semantic scruple / In an intractable sea." The poet is "far / From his people" and "His posture is / Grandiloquent." But for all the familiar gestures of accusation, Mahon finds himself unable to dismiss Stevens out-of-hand and concludes:

Now watch me
As I make history,
Watch as I tear down

To build up
With a desperate love,
Knowing it cannot be
Long now till I have need of his
Terminal ironies. (47–48)

Mahon's contemporary, Seamus Heaney, has scattered references to Stevens in his formal essays, but in an interview in 1988 he admitted a great attraction to the poet, even as he found him "difficult" and (though he recognizes a "deep mind-current") elusive in demonstrating a unifying "gestalt." Heaney's puzzled ambivalence is apparent:

Wallace Stevens I am helplessly in awe of but my response is as helpless as it is awed. When I open the door into that great cloudscape of language, I am transported joyfully. And I have

got to a stage of reading Stevens where—to mix the metaphor—I can feel the bone under the cloud. I love his oil-on-water, brilliant phantasmagoria. And there is deep mind-current under the water, and a kind of water-muscle mind at work, but I find it difficult to hold that in my own reader's mind. I find it difficult to see a Stevensian gestalt in the way I can see Frost as a whole. I can see Frost defined against a sky or landscape. Somehow with Stevens, I cannot see the poetry defined. It is coterminous with the horizon. That says a lot for him but it also means he is difficult to think about. (Brandes 15–16)

In his Nobel address, Heaney confesses to a deliberate neglect of Stevens during his earlier years because the American poet appeared insufficiently engaged politically: “I went for years half-avoiding and half-resisting the opulence and extensiveness of poets as different as Wallace Stevens and Rainer Maria Rilke” (*Opened Ground* 418).

However, neglect notwithstanding, in his poem “The Bookcase” from *Electric Light* (2001), Heaney remembers fondly his volumes by MacDiarmid, Bishop, Hardy, and Yeats—volumes that rested colorfully on his bookcase shelves. To this personal and unofficial canonization, he goes on to add: “Voices too of Frost and Wallace Stevens / Off a Caedmon double album, off different shelves” (60). Heaney also begins one of his best-known essays, “The Redress of Poetry,” by implicitly identifying his own views of the role of politics in poetry with those of Stevens. He quotes Stevens’ defense of the imagination as “‘a violence from within that protects us from a violence without,’ ” but then comments:

Such an operation does not intervene in the actual, but by offering consciousness a chance to recognize its predicaments, foreknow its capacities and rehearse its comebacks in all kinds of venturesome ways, it does constitute a beneficent event, for poet and audience alike. It offers a response to reality which has a liberating and verifying effect upon the individual spirit, and yet I can see how such a function would be deemed insufficient by a political activist. (*Finders Keepers* 281, 282)

Stevens himself once said, “At best it is difficult for an American poet to make his way in England. With all the realism of their situation over there, my sort of thing might find itself terribly out of place and, if so, given the freedom with which Englishmen discuss American books, would probably have no chance at all” (*L* 524). Though Stevens wrote these words in 1946, he seems to have been remarkably prescient. In turn, the British have taken him at his word, so to speak, and applied that judgment accordingly. Many of his British and Irish readers continue to find much to marvel at in his poetry and to regret that he is not better known and yet

feel a distance, a separation, as if the sensibility of this American poet remains excessively disguised in ornament and obfuscation. It is perhaps not sufficiently appreciated that, as a poet, Stevens is as sensuous as Keats; as absorbed by the natural world as Wordsworth;⁴ with as much ostentation in style, at least in his early work, as Hopkins; as committed as Arnold to the role of poetry in a post-Christian world. In a tentative way, his undergraduate verse shows the unlikely influence of poets such as Sidney and Herrick (*Souvenirs and Prophecies* 50–1, 28). Although Stevens has sometimes sounded too foreign to the British ear, his work cannot be said to be antithetical to the English tradition.

When American poets generally are granted the status and respect of their British counterparts by British critics and readers within British universities—and this has not yet happened—Stevens' standing there will surely find its own level of validation. Over the last quarter century the British engagement with Stevens has been proceeding slowly, even as it continues to meet resistance. Especially as younger readers and critics have rediscovered him, and as his influence has made its way among British and Irish poets, one hears again Eliot's prediction stated more than a half-century ago. It rings perhaps less confidently now than then, but with the resonance of an evolving truth: "Now his reputation [in England] is beginning to spread to the people who don't know [his work]" (9).

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Notes

¹Peter du Sautoy to George S. Lensing, 3 August 1976.

²John Bodley to George S. Lensing, 20 November 2001.

³The remark is referred to by Mary Jane W. Scott in her essay "Neoclassical MacCaig," 142. She refers to an unpublished interview with MacCaig conducted by M. J. Wittstock on 12 January 1972.

⁴See especially the essay by Jonathan Wordsworth.

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Cross-Dressing as Stevens Cross-Dressing

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READING JORIE GRAHAM'S 1986 Stevensian poem "Self-Portrait as Hurry and Delay" recently, it occurred to me not only that thinking about gender illuminates Wallace Stevens' poems, but that Stevens' work casts light on the multiple ways gender works in the construction of poetic legacies. For example, comparing Graham's version of Penelope in her "Self-Portrait" with Stevens' Penelope in "The World as Meditation," it appears that Stevens is involved in some form of cross-dressing. Interestingly, however, so is Graham. That is, it seems to me Graham is not reappropriating Penelope, but rather cross-dressing as Stevens cross-dressing, which complicates any understanding of Stevens' poem both as legacy *and* as it circulated in the 1950s when it was written.

The difficulty with discussing Stevens' cross-dressing is compounded because most theorizing of cross-dressing focuses on the visual, often on cinema, and Stevens' "The World as Meditation" neither fetishizes bodies nor, to use Michael Rogin's formulation, proclaims the distinction between ascribed identity and role in quite the way that prose or performative representations of transvestite bodies are usually theorized as doing (277). Indeed, recent gender theorists rarely talk about poetry. Despite Judith Butler's influential discussions of the performative, poetry as performing (or at times dramatizing) the mind in the act of finding—a poetics that most critics would agree forms a large part of Stevens' legacy—is not easily reclad in the vocabularies used to discuss gendered physical bodies.¹ To pursue some of the implications of this fact, I want here primarily to look with some care at Stevens' 1952 "The World as Meditation"; then I will end with a brief glance back on Graham's poem and say more about what I believe, in the context I hope to have established, it helps to suggest about Stevens' legacy.

I have just implied that Stevens is impersonating Penelope, but readings of "The World as Meditation" are actually not in agreement on this point. Joseph Riddel's early précis helps (if inadvertently) to introduce the problem of gender in the poem. Riddel's reading proposes that "desire is satisfied only by knowing the proximate, never the ultimate, satisfaction, like Penelope waiting for a Ulysses and finding satisfaction in the thought rather than the fact of his coming. Ulysses is the sun (the male,

vital, life principle) which brings only its own presence" (247). Unlike Riddel, however, other well-respected critics in early books from the sixties identified Ulysses with the (desiring) mind of the poet (Baird 287; Burney 169; see also Doggett 172).

Some critical shifts in perspective over the past forty years surely have to do with challenges to the assumption that the universal poetic subject must be masculine. Yet close attention to Stevens' language suggests that the readings of Ulysses as a poet-figure are not so easy to dismiss. The poem is, after all, written in the third person, using what if we were reading a piece of fiction by Flaubert we would call free indirect discourse, making it difficult to speak clearly of *a* narrative voice. The poem is not, if you will, monologic, and the reader is carefully positioned—but *also shifted*—throughout the poem. For example, the first-person quotation from Enesco that serves as an epigraph begins: "I have spent too much time working on my violin, traveling."² The physical embodiments of exercise (practicing an instrument, travel) are then contrasted with the "essential exercise" of meditation—clearly Penelope's *forté* in the body of the poem—but the first sentence of the epigraph nonetheless encourages a reading of Ulysses—who is called an "interminable adventurer" in line two of the poem itself—as the male artist figure who travels, featured in the passage from Enesco. At the same time, the perspective of the poem itself is first of someone peering into the distance, looking *for* the paradigmatic traveler: "Is it Ulysses that approaches from the east. . . ?" Then the second tercet describes how

A form of fire approaches the cretonnes of Penelope,
Whose mere savage presence awakens the world in which
she dwells. (CP 520)

The use of the third person obscures at first whose perspective the poem adopts; in the lines just quoted, we hear a narrator we are first inclined to identify with Enesco's traveler, but a narrator whose knowledge is gradually limited, positioned as one who watches the sun (or Ulysses) approach Penelope's home. Our knowledge is also circumscribed by the syntax. The reference of "whose" in the second tercet—"whose mere savage presence"—is ambiguous. Does "whose" refer back to the "form of fire" (what Riddel called "the male, vital, life principle") or to the immediately preceding noun clause or proper name, which is to say to "Penelope"?

One could simply rely on stereotypes (in terms of which the "savage presence" would presumably be male), but in that case the contrast would be between the male savage—not obviously prone to poetic meditative exercise—and the female meditator, she who weaves and unweaves both mentally and physically. In any event, it is Penelope who practices creation and decreation, the terms Stevens used to characterize poetic process. Moreover, well before the middle of this eight-stanza poem, the world

is described not only from the perspective of Penelope's domestic setting but eventually from the perspective of Penelope herself. We are told, "She has composed, so long, a self" (CP 521) and also told of her desires, thoughts, and memory: all interior aspects of Penelope, which is why the poem seems to many to align not just the figure of the poet but also the narrative voice of the poem with *her*.

Still, the free indirect discourse, the placement of the epigraph, the uses of tropes familiar from other Stevens writings all work together so that the subject position opened for the reader is not stable throughout "The World as Meditation." Even at the end of the poem—where we are invited to imagine Stevens imagining Penelope's imaginings of Ulysses—there is still a deliberate confusion as to who imagines whom. In the same way that the poem leaves open the question of whether the "savage presence" is Penelope or the Ulysses-like sun, it leaves questions open when we are told of Penelope's repetition of Ulysses' name "with its patient syllables" (CP 521). Why patient syllables? Penelope's patience may be here transferred to Ulysses, or perhaps to the name he has become in Penelope's imagination, just as his (if it is his) "savage[ness]" is ultimately internalized by Penelope, who has her own "barbarous strength within" (as we are told in line 21). In other words, gender stereotypes (savagery, patience) are not tidily parceled out along gender lines here.

Note too the tense shifts in the poem. We begin in the present with a question: "Is it Ulysses"? By the third tercet, however, we are moved away from present tense: Penelope "has composed" a self, and at least one of the selves at issue is one she "imagined." In stanza four, the trees that are mended in line two become the trees that "had been mended," which allows the poem a modulation to past tense: no winds "watched"; Penelope "wanted." By the time the first line's question is repeated in stanza six there has been a temporal change: "was it Ulysses?" Is the tense shift a marker of Penelope's activity as memory of (or as meditation on) a stark, purely sensual experience? Or does the shift mark a narrative presence, a voice (by some accounts, Stevens' male voice) that has composed Penelope as self-image but now reclaims the meditation about that image for itself? The questions proliferate with the further tense shift in the final stanza: "She *would* talk." The figure, in short, may be of Penelope, but, if so, it is Penelope either as or in memory projecting a self forward. The questions raised by such features of the poem are, I am suggesting, deliberately opened.

So it is not surprising that critics have so variously construed the narrative voice and the poet-figure in "The World as Meditation." Nor should it be surprising that there are equally discordant critical *judgments* on the (variously identified) voice of the poem. It has been proposed that we have Stevens ventriloquizing; Stevens being democratic or maternal or ethical in allowing others their otherness; Stevens appropriating the feminine, or using his fictional women as Lacanian mirrors (Beehler 267, 276;

Rusk 23–24; Watson 80–81; Wagner 135, 137; Baeten 34; Nyquist 323, 318). I am less interested in entering into or settling these critical debates than in pointing out how the poem's narrative strategies, its modulations of perspective and verb tenses, its ambiguous referents, invite such a broad range of readings. I earlier proposed that the end of the poem leaves us imagining Stevens imagining Penelope imagining Ulysses; that is, the poem's final narrative frame underlines how many subject positions one might attend to, although what to make of the shifting gender crossings remains a problem.

Part of the issue, finally, is who is masquerading as whom (or as what) and for what end. Flat-footedly, we have general critical agreement that one who desires (and seems thus like the figure of the poet) imagines some other, who is either allowed to be other or not. More generally, however, there is a regress of constructed images, shifting gender at each remove. In short, even if Penelope is Stevens' mask seen as a form of minstrelsy, the poem potentially contains its own critique by virtue of its self-consciousness about the difference between ascribed identity and role (see North 6–7; Rogin 49–53; Donate 17–28). In other words, Stevens *is* cross-dressing. Yet to say this does not tell us why or to what effect he does so.

With this question in mind, I want to return to think a bit more about how the free indirect discourse works in this late poem. Does it allow Stevens to wear the role of Penelope lightly? To assume power? Rogin, for example, notes that the "more performance scripts identity, the more it serves power," and yet "the more freedom to perform any role, the less subversion in the play" (34). Or is the free indirect discourse working in something like the way Charles Altieri suggests the third person can work in the lyric generally, as a power of subjective agency, opening "paths or modes of sight and insight whose tiltings of the world [readers] can share" (299)? All these hypotheses could be true at once, of course, but in any of these cases it would have to be said that there is a *lack* of self-identity or self-sufficiency figured (whether between author and speaker, speaker and character, or author and reader). And given arguments such as Marjorie Garber's that such self-difference is central to transvestism, as an act of "putting in question" and of destabilizing not just normative categories but the very idea of categorization (16), "The World as Meditation" appears to use gender much as it uses narrative voice, to foreground the act of "putting in question." Finally, too, the poem seems in this way to imagine its own (future) readers, in the chain of imaginations of variously gendered others that it represents as well as in the shifting positions it requires of readers.

I am not alone in suggesting that by 1952 Stevens was concerned about the future of his poetry, about continuing to write poems but also about how his poems would be read in the future (see Berger 142–43). It is worth underlining, however, that the way Stevens by the 1950s linked such concerns with gender suggests his thinking had shifted from earlier construc-

tions, presumably shifting as he aged but also as poetry was repositioned in the mid-twentieth century American imaginary. His use of figures from *The Odyssey* helps show this shift. "The Odyssey" is mentioned in early letters such as one Stevens wrote to his then-fiancée, about going for a walk instead of visiting her, in 1907: "To-day was so much of an Odyssey for me that you must forgive my truancy" (L 99). Yet the poem Stevens' letter cites is not a Homeric epic, but "The Odyssey" by Andrew Lang, a Victorian sonnet. In context the sonnet is not finally about manly adventure versus domestication; it is (in the final lines of the sestet) about hearing the "'surge and thunder of the Odyssey,'" which are "'like ocean'" (L 99). That is, the sonnet is about reading—in particular about the sounds of serious poetry, contrasted with the delusions of modern poets turned from men into domesticated beasts. It is, in short, a poem about poetic aspiration. Stevens' letter does call his day "an Odyssey" and does defend his pursuits as masculine. But following Lang's poem as it does, his proclamation about his odyssey is centrally about the pleasures of reading or fantasizing, rather than any physical act or encounter.

Many of Stevens' earlier writings both internalized and resisted cultural definitions of feminized genteel poetry and of a feminized audience for poetry (Steinman 195–202). The 1907 letter to Elsie is not strictly about this tension, but it is in line with it. By mid-century, however, there were different cultural commonplaces informing Stevens' anxieties about the cultural spaces in which lyrics might be read. Specifically, the place of poetry no longer seemed to be the genteel parlors Stevens imagined and fended off in his youth. Rather, his letters suggest poetry is threatened by a world increasingly filled with the language of advertising and political sloganeering, with widely disseminated public or faux-personal rhetorics, in the face of which he came to voice a less equivocal desire for a more personal (and more feminized) "world of closer, human intimacies" (L 730–31, 737). In short, by 1952, Stevens characterizes a private and feminized space as what poetry may require to be reanimated or to live on as legacy.

As one might expect, Stevens' views of poetic legacy—like his imaginations of gendered cultural spaces—are not simple. It is especially telling that in revising "To an Old Philosopher in Rome," scheduled to be published with "The World as Meditation," Stevens wrote instructing the *Hudson Review* editor to change the line "Impatient of the grandeur that you need" to read, instead, "Impatient for the grandeur that you need" (L 745). The line, in context, is about Santayana's faith, but Stevens also seems both anxious that he will not leave a legacy and worried (having already received the Bollingen Prize in 1949, for instance) that he has already become a monument, one of those marble heads "weathering in the grass" (CP 514) featured in the Ozymandias-like second section of "Two Illustrations That the World Is What You Make of It," another of the poems published in the *Hudson Review*.³ The "power . . . to be transformed"

when cast in new light (as in the eyes of later readers) indeed seems to be on Stevens' mind. Consider, for example, the line break in "Two Illustrations" between the fourth and fifth couplets of section two: "He had said that everything possessed / The power to transform itself, or else, / And what meant more, to be transformed" (CP 514). The power to transform one's self—or else. "[O]r else" hangs in mind, eventually a sign of precisely the kind of mental activity that *is* poetic life for Stevens. But for a moment it also more ominously figures the alternative: transform, or else! The poem is clearly obsessed with the "appropriate image of [I]self," as provided by (as much as projected on) "another nature" (CP 513).

It is in light of such anxieties that I would read Stevens' late nostalgia for a more personalized and clearly feminized world. Roughly a year after writing "The World as Meditation," Stevens wrote to Barbara Church about receiving a degree from Mount Holyoke (about which Stevens notes Marianne Moore may have already written to Church). There was at Mount Holyoke, Stevens wrote, "a feeling of friendliness and of being human, which women seem to create" (L 756). Five months earlier, Stevens wrote to Norman Holmes Pearson that he specifically associated Moore with "an older and much more personal world: the world of closer, human intimacies" (L 737), presumably set against what in June 1951 Stevens dismissed in an earlier letter to Pearson, namely mass media slogans and the languages of newspapers, photographs, rallies, government propagandists, and foundations, among other forms of generalized and commercialized public language (L 730–31). In short, Stevens revisits the idea of domestic space, the world of women, now set not against the world of internal odysseys or virile poetry but against the public rhetorics in circulation.

The letters I have been citing not only consistently return to ponder the future of poetry and the fact of aging, but they also frame such issues in terms of questions about and a desire for human contact. Another letter (to Barbara Church) reads as follows: "The truth is that one gets out of contact with people . . . and feels the immense need . . . of people for other people, a thing [which he also describes as "the pull between people"] that has been in my thoughts for a long time, in one form or another" (L 759). I would suggest that Penelope is one of those forms. Yet another late letter ends with an expression of pleasure that Barbara Church will return to New York from abroad; as Stevens says "although I see little of everyone, still I can always feel them on the horizon" (L 762).⁴

Who, then, in "The World as Meditation" is "moving on the horizon and lifting himself above it"? Not just the inhuman, it seems. And not just Stevens' friends and contemporaries, but also future readers. In 1951, accepting the National Book Award, Stevens described the poetry of Sir Walter Scott as being like scenery trucked away and stored "on the horizon or just a little below" (OP 254). In short, Stevens is concerned with human contact as both sociability *and* legacy, concerned with not having his poems stored below the horizon even as he seems aware that having

future readers will entail that he turn control over to others in order to avoid becoming an easily outdated statue, sunk beneath the horizon. Finally, then, "The World as Meditation" is in part an imagination of Stevens' earlier self being revisited and reread. That is, the former sun/Ulysses' self is being reimagined as internalized by the new reader-poet, Penelope, a role that a later poet such as Graham is able to adopt.

Although it is not my purpose here to offer any real account of Graham's work, I would like to point out that the poem of hers with which I began, "Self-Portrait as Hurry and Delay," is not only thematically linked to Stevens but also identifies self-portraiture and questions about the construction of the poetic self as part of a Stevensian legacy (McGuiness 151; Spiegelman 176; Snodgrass 152, 155; Graham, "Pleasure" 93). Further, Graham uses narrative frames, a shifting narrative voice, and, moreover, makes a concern with her readers literally central to the poem. The middle section reads in its entirety: "Reader, minutes" ("Self-Portrait" 50). But Graham is not only representing, she is also trying on the role of reader (as the one who takes and uses minutes, who creates and decreates Stevens) first scripted *by* Stevens.⁵

Admittedly, from the perspective of the late Stevens, being read by future readers is both a thing to be desired and a threat, even if only a threat contained by being scripted in advance. But it is also an imagination of a creative future reader as a woman. Natalie Davis has suggested that for cross-dressing to work as subversion in early modern Europe required a culturally shared sense of hierarchy and of gender relations, and further required that women be both lower in the cultural hierarchy and understood as disruptive (150–51). For Stevens, especially early in his career, women indeed figured powerlessness (as did poetry), but women were aligned with gentility, as later with human-scaled and humane personal exchange, not with disorder. Stevens' orderly inversion of power relations may nonetheless open imaginative possibilities for later women poets such as Graham (much in the way less orderly inversions did for late medieval or early modern women on Davis' account). There is a difference, however, between Davis' women using carnivale and Graham's use of Stevens. Given that Stevens, as he both hoped and feared, had been monumentalized by the time Graham wrote her poem, there may in 1986 have been more power gained by assuming his rhetorical hedging, narrative frames, shifting perspectives, and cross-dressing than by taking his Penelope straight.

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Notes

¹ For useful discussions of cross-dressing, on which I draw in this essay, see Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter* (in particular chapter 4, "Gender Is Burning"), as well as

Marjorie Garber's *Vested Interests*, Carole-Anne Tyler's *Female Impersonation*, and Gastón Alonso Donate's " 'In Whose Eyes is What Chic Radical?': A Tootsie's Ruminations on Cross-Dressing."

² "J'ai passé trop de temps à travailler mon violon, à voyager" (CP 520). I would like to thank Hugh Hochman for help with the French.

³ The poems in *The Hudson Review* group published in the fall of 1952 were "To an Old Philosopher in Rome," "The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain," "Vacancy in the Park," "Two Illustrations That the World Is What You Make of It," "Prologues to What Is Possible," "Looking Across the Fields and Watching the Birds Fly," "Song of Fixed Accord," and "The World as Meditation."

⁴ I should reiterate that the language in which Stevens expresses his desire for other people is at the same time politically charged. See Alan Filreis' account of the roughly contemporary "The Sail of Ulysses"—and its recycling of the endlessness of questions—specifically as a response to Cold War and McCarthy era attacks on the United States Information Agency's Voice of America project as well as (again) to the public rhetoric of the period (246–71).

⁵ See Graham's comments on readers in Snodgrass' "Interview with Jorie Graham," 152, 156, and on the aggressiveness of the desire to transform in "Pleasure," 93. See also David R. Jarraway's account of a slightly different way in which Stevens' legacy (similarly construed) works for writers such as Mark Doty. I am grateful to Patricia Greve for first bringing to my attention the rhetorical similarities between Graham's "Self-Portrait" and Stevens' later style.

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“A Book Too Mad to Read”: Verbal and Erotic Excess in *Harmonium*

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MANY OF THE POEMS in Wallace Stevens' *Harmonium* can be described as taking place in the vicinity of women. The women are mute, murmuring, remote, frequently discontent. On the rare occasion when they have an opportunity to speak, replies are not forthcoming, although one should note that male speakers in Stevens also go unanswered: that is precisely where the reader comes in. Stevens achieves intimacy with his audience by averring that poetry alone sponsors verbal disclosure. If T. S. Eliot ruptures the drawing room setting in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” then Stevens lets us glimpse it in “Sunday Morning” and “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle” at the very point of its acutest vanishing. Poems in *Harmonium* sketch the traces of impossible rendezvous, leaving vacancy reverberating with apostrophic address.

Considering the deliberate sketchiness, the outlined abstractness of the female figure in *Harmonium*, it is all the more intriguing that women are so often represented by Stevens as seductive emblems of excess, either for what they embody in themselves, or as a deep reflection of their surroundings. Often we find a speaker/observer, whom we are always invited to read as masculine, beholding and declaiming scenes that he cannot master. These scenarios are elusive amalgams of the feminine and the exotic: the feminine-as-exotic, the exotic-as-feminine, with all roads leading to the palace of excess, which Stevens spurns and craves.

To read the poems Stevens wrote in the five years preceding “Sunday Morning” and “Peter Quince at the Clavier,” where at his best he sounded a tepid echo of W. B. Yeats's *The Wind Among the Reeds*, is to realize how long it took this poet to learn ways to capture and deflect desire in a manner both intense and oblique. Excess begets excess, and as Stevens allows strong desire into his poetry, it is met by falling torrents of verbal discharge. (One might easily reverse this narrative of causality.) The epic question of “Sunday Morning”—“Why should she give her bounty to the dead?” (*CP* 67)—announces Stevens' arrival as a self-authorized adjudicator of the claims made by rival dispensations, religious and secular, and coincides nicely with the license he grants himself to speak of the excess that he sees as constitutive of woman. “[B]ounty” is wonderfully complex

in this context. Coming from the Latin for “goodness” (*L. bonitas*), and linking itself to notions of reward, the word sustains punning down to its depths, for why distinguish between goodness and *goods*, when Stevens himself does not? That a bounty is placed upon the woman indicates her status as threat. Embodying excess, Stevens’ woman might best be described in words borrowed from Marianne Moore’s 1923 poem “Marriage”: “the strange experience of beauty; / its existence is too much” (63).

The principle of “too much” makes its first appearance in *Harmonium* by way of the 1915 poem “Peter Quince at the Clavier,” where Stevens employs a kind of abstract ekphrasis to retell the much-painted, over-motivated story of Susanna and the elders, in this case without the rescuing figure of Daniel. The poem’s speaker enters the frame of the pictorial scene by registering the “strain” awakened in him by desire for “you” in “your blue-shadowed silk” (CP 90) and going on to make the strained, but disconcertingly natural, comparison between his ache of excess and the reaction of the elders to Susanna. Comparing himself, however parodically, to those censorious gerontions might well have induced a rancid rant against the body. Instead, Stevens takes the poem into the *locus amoenus* of autoerotic gratification, as Susanna searches the springs of “Concealed imaginings”—at least until the police are called. Susanna’s section parades the pleasure she takes in her own bounty, or the voyeuristic pleasure of that spectacle as gathered in by the gaze of the red-eyed (not red-blooded) elders. The impresario Quince, whether he plays the clavier or the harmonium, seems capable of flitting between positions, now with the elders, now with the naked woman. There is more than a touch of concealed identification with Susanna, aided by the summoning and reversing of Whitman’s fable, in the eleventh section of *Song of Myself*, of rich lady and young male bathers. Of Quince, too, it might be said: “You splash in the water there, yet stay stock-still in your room” (34). The poem portrays desire as a “strain,” only partly ameliorated by emphasizing the musical meanings of the term. The strain of desiring at a distance, of desiring the body in its silken veilings, of playing the drawing-room game of deferral, leads the poem’s speaker to explore the more tangible connection between “my fingers on these keys” and Susanna’s “touch” (CP 89, 90). The discovery of a kindred strain of self-gratifying prowess between speaker and Susanna quells the resentment produced by feelings of untouchable excess—indeed, quells the sense of excess itself. For one prolonged moment, the male speaker merges with the object of the male gaze, replacing voyeurism with shared narcissistic delight.

“Le Monocle de Mon Oncle,” written three years after “Peter Quince,” is the first Stevens poem to deploy a plot in which verbal excess poses openly as a substitute for unsatisfied, or unsatisfiable, erotic demands. Spherical, but slightly off-kilter (those eleven-line stanzas), the poem’s rondures (emphasized by those *o*’s in the title) threaten at times to shrivel, like the warty squash, or merely circulate in a round to pass the time, but

when the strategy is working, Stevens creates a self-contained system bulging with currents and countercurrents of erotic energy. "Le Monocle" ostentatiously displays the wealth of a man of fortune with no heirs but himself and the gaiety of his language. The poem circles in search of an escape from the anxiety of excess, lodged in the fetishistically fixed sight of the woman "without pity," La Belle Dame Sans Merci, "come dripping in your hair from sleep" (CP 14). It is Susanna, risen from the bath, no longer blissfully alone. Since Stevens has left the door wide open for conjecture, one might surmise that this is the very moment that produces " 'no, no, . . . the clashed edges of two words that kill" (CP 13). Her refusal maintains the word apart from flesh and assures the coupled fall from "amours" to "amorists" (CP 15). Eliot represented his male quester succumbing to a form of hysterical blindness when confronted by the Hyacinth Girl: "Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not / Speak, and my eyes failed" (54). "The Waste Land" everywhere implies that such catastrophic impotence mirrors a global landscape of drought and dearth. Stevens, by contrast, scrupulously avoids prophetic/pathetic fallacy. He recognizes the abiding resilience of earth's verve ("the firefly's quick, electric stroke" [CP 15]) even as he mocks, with ebullient ennui, his own failure to match such intensity.

Any mention of ennui brings the figure of the Dandy to mind. "Le Monocle" serves as well as any text to tell the history of this type, not in flat historic style, but in a dazzlingly figurative manner that preserves full ambivalence. By his monocle shall ye know him. Years later, in "Mountains Covered with Cats," Stevens turns a complicated figuration upon the monocle, defining it by contrast to the severely analytic, instrumental eye of the doctor, in this case Dr. Sigmund Freud: "Freud's eye was the microscope of potency" (CP 368). By showing how a hornbook exercise in the arbitrariness of homonyms (monocle, mon oncle) can blossom into an unexpected semantic connection (the monocle that suits the eye of the "bachelor" uncle), Stevens performs cultural history through the magic of the pun. I call the uncle-persona a figure for the bachelor because he seems to affiliate himself with a long line of such narrators, characterized by quizzical attitudes toward female erotic excess. How should one define the relation between French uncle and American nephew, nephew in America? (Henry James would have known how to work it.) That unlovely word, "uncle," flits with fetching instability between the poles of avuncularity and dissolution. Put under the scrutiny of his own monocle, the uncle-in-Stevens seems to counsel against succumbing to the threat of excess, even while he breathlessly traces the fluctuations of desire. Stevens will go on to write a "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," but "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" might be regarded as the Prime Monologue of the Interior *Amoriste*.

A closer look at the literary genealogy of "Le Monocle" takes the bachelor even further back, exploring his roots in figures of "lordly study" (CP

17), as the poem puts it, dark Penseroso-like rabbis who immure themselves as a way of defending against the female dripping with erotic power. Several times, the speaker in "Le Monocle" declares it necessary to stabilize the self by finding what he terms "a substance in us that prevails" (CP 15). Related to that underlying grit, apparently, is a totemic "tree," identified as a guarantor, not of objective reality, but of metaphorical consanguinity: "I know a tree that bears / A semblance to the thing I have in mind. / It stands gigantic, with a certain tip" (CP 17). Long before phallogentrism was clinically identified, Stevens was wielding it, but with self-parodying skepticism. He makes it plain to see how defensive, compensatory, and funny such a flaunting of totemic authority can be, when the poem itself undercuts any such planting of the staff. For Stevens deftly dissolves celebrations of monolithic self-hood. Nor is he above punning his way out of petrification. Take the declaration: "If men at forty will be painting lakes / The ephemeral blues must merge for them in one, / The basic slate, the universal hue" (CP 15). How can there be, he wants us to ask, a "universal hue," when the one of "uni-" glides effortlessly into the "you" of "hue"? The monocled speaker, after all, morphs into a cognate uncle, *mon semblable, mon frère*. Whatever aesthetic joy might be gathered from the aesthete's prolific acts of self-parturition is tempered by the understanding that such masquerading hides a flight from the enchantments of erotic excess.

The eleventh section of "Le Monocle" brings forward a word almost never used by Stevens, the word "sex," for he nearly always prefers "desire." It is probably not by accident that the word appears at this numerologically crucial juncture, since each section of the poem contains eleven lines, and "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" is the eleventh poem in *Harmonium*: "If sex were all, then every trembling hand / Could make us squeak, like dolls, the wished-for words" (CP 17). "[S]ex" startles, as it is meant to, fitting uneasily into a neat apodictic declaration that seems, on the surface, to settle the issue; but the two sentences move past so swiftly that it is not at all clear what has been settled. We need to notice that sex, here, seems to issue in "wished-for words," and that sexual satisfaction appears to come by means of the hand, not the full body. Are we back in the bath with Susanna? Whereas Susanna remained mute, the uncle or nephew wants words to result from whatever encounter he permits. Although the wording is close, one cannot imagine Stevens uttering Hart Crane's hushed appeal: "Permit me voyage, love, into your hands" (36). Nor could he indulge in a surrender, as Eliot imagines it close to the end of "The Waste Land," "to controlling hands" (69). No, for Stevens it is a question of finding a way for the hand to produce desired words, but without utterly eliding the body, for "Le Monocle" refuses to accept the "trivial trope" of hand for techné, even as it maintains a degree of fastidiousness about who, exactly, gets to lay a hand on the body of the poet. It may be that the poet defends himself against excess by imitatively mocking the

"no, no" of his dripping partner, meeting refusal with refusal, turning to the "higher" pleasures of language as a tactical evasion of his body's diminishing energy and appeal.

Any account of the link between verbal and sexual excess in Stevens must face the oceanic letter sea of "The Comedian as the Letter C," especially the last two sections of the poem, added to "From the Journal of Crispin" in the summer of 1922, as Joan Richardson notes (*Early Years* 521–22). The poem culminates, if that is the right word, in Crispin's drowning in the sea of feminized domesticity: first, it is the quotidian itself that saps him, a realm confined to the precincts of the house and its duenna. Then, four daughters come, submerging the prickly quester in a riotous excess of feminine demand, conspicuously over-determined by linguistic luxuriousness. In terms of biography, Stevens is oddly prophetic at the end of "The Comedian," anticipating the birth of his sole daughter and sole child by two years. The final section of the poem, "And Daughters with Curls," seems to negate the mock anxiety of the question posed in "Le Monocle": "Alas! Have all the barbers lived in vain / That not one curl in nature has survived?" (*CP* 14). Crispin indeed prolongs himself in nature by producing curls off the old block, but "And Daughters with Curls" hardly celebrates such natural extension, for it presents us with a vertiginous swirl of trope-making and unmaking, doings and undoings. A traditional male poetic economy, depending upon substitution and distance, comes under attack (launched by the male poet himself) in the flood of counter-figurations that deluge us in the closing section of "The Comedian," as if Stevens were experimenting with a form of ruinous relaxation.

Throughout the poem, the figure of Crispin has been scattered, dismembered, split up into the constituent sounds that comprise his very name. Stevens famously described the poem's structure as being built around the many sounds wrung upon the letter "C" (*L* 351–52), but what he withheld from readers was the "sparagmos" that Crispin undergoes as the body of his name is torn asunder into all the letters that comprise it, not simply the capital C. Working through the poem, one is struck by recurrent, phonemic sound-clusters that can be regrouped as belonging to the family of "Crispin." When his "natural" family "arrives," at the poem's end, Crispin is blotched out once more, only this time the undoing has a strongly gendered element to it. Undeniably, a strange kind of identification does come about between Crispin and his daughters, as they swim together in the alphabet soup of language run amok, but the overall result leads to a dangerous disembodiment in which mature desire, so effectively thwarted by domesticity, escapes into the polysemous seminality of unkeyed verbal exuberance. Once again, excess begets excess.

The poem would not be as pathos-ridden as it is, however, if Stevens were unable to locate the pain of blockage in moments of acute word-choice. But he knows how to show the male poet, at least, in distress. Lying beside the unnamed but recurrent "her" of *Harmonium* and the volumes

to come, Crispin's nights are described in these terms: "While he poured out upon the lips of her / That lay beside him" (CP 43). Crispin is being drained, he is leaking, he is being emptied out by the conditions of ungratified desire in the actual world, so he saves his torrents of desire for the one who, precisely, is not there in the body.

As Stevens moves toward the end of the *Harmonium* cycle, he writes an increasing number of poems that focus on the difficult writing of desire, poems that overtly betray the difficulty of incorporating "tormenting, / Insatiable" (CP 48) drives into the body of lyric. Two examples would be "O Florida, Venereal Soil" and "Last Looks at the Lilacs." But I want this paper to take a last look, for now, at the subject of excess by means of a poem that seems, on its surface, to have little to do with eros, a poem that appears abstract and mechanistic in its vision of the tropics: "Sea Surface Full of Clouds." It is fair to say that the poem's surface has struck many readers as oddly evasive in its tour de force shuffling of repetitive elements. A. Walton Litz put it very well thirty years ago, when he wrote: "there are tantalizing hints that the poem is a displaced and disguised treatment of emotions and occasions that never enter its public life" (150–51). "Displaced" is the perfect word to describe the play of substitutions in "Sea Surface." As for the poem's "private life," that would encompass the fascinating place of "Sea Surface" within Stevens' actual existence. "[T]hat November" refers to November 1923 when Stevens and his wife took the only extended vacation of their marriage, a cruise that carried them "off Tehuantepec," in "that Pacific calm" (CP 98, 99). *Harmonium* had just been published, on September 7, 1923. Holly Stevens, only child of Wallace and Elsie, was conceived during the vacation. She was born in August 1924, but the poem beat her by a month, appearing in the July 1924 number of the *Dial* (Richardson, *Later Years* 22–25).

"Sea Surface Full of Clouds" positions itself as something of a doppelgänger, a secret sharer of the real-life voyage and its issue, the child evolving in the womb. Indeed, the poem identifies a child in its first French phrase, its first answer to the question of who authors or sponsors the vision of "sea-blooms from the clouds": "*C'était mon enfant, mon bijou, mon âme*" (CP 99). Portions of Hart Crane's "Voyages" were published in January 1923 (Crane 233), before "Sea Surface" was written, and it is intriguing to think about how Stevens might have reacted to the closing line of "Voyages" I: "the bottom of the sea is cruel" (Crane 34). Stevens stays with the unstable surface, searching out the reflection of clouds in water, and the artificiality of his variations, so different from the piercing analogies of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," indicates that he will not enter the contest of deep-sea diver poets. Depth appears to enter the poem by means of the italicized French responses to persistent calls for identification. Who evolved, saw, heard, beheld, as the oddly psalm-like verbs put it? In each case, the answer describes and ascribes imaginary consanguinity, twice creating rivals to the natural child growing in the

mother's womb: "mon enfant," "mon esprit bâtard" (CP 99, 102). French itself becomes a rival to English, although Stevens later said in his "Adagia" that "French and English constitute a single language" (OP 202). Speaking to himself, of himself, of what belongs most intimately to him, in a cognate tongue, Stevens foregrounds the power of language to create counter-natural, indeed illegitimate affiliations. "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," through its verbal legerdemain, elides the body of both woman and sea, attempting to transfigure and master excess in a tongue that lies just this side of being "too mad to read" (CP 14).

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Place-Names in Wallace Stevens

ELEANOR COOK

WALLACE STEVENS ANNOUNCES his interest in place-names on the first page of his first collection, as those bucks go clattering over the end of line one and into Oklahoma. Or rather, *over* Oklahoma, also “the end of the line” in a manner of speaking in 1918. The odd skewing of the preposition and the odd diction of “bucks” “clattering” draw attention to Oklahoma as more than simple reference. Those bucks are actual animals (as Stevens said they were; see *L* 204, 209). Yet they are not actual animals in a realistic plot. Bucks may graze or gallop but they do not ordinarily clatter. Horses sometimes do, so that a fanciful ghostly memory of, say, Regency bucks clattering on their horses over cobblestone streets can echo faintly in the odd diction of animals “clattering / Over” (*CP* 3)—clattering over a decidedly non-Regency place, the recent state of Oklahoma. The same thing is true of the firecat, an actual though mysterious animal, yet not in a realistic plot. Rather, it exists in several possible plots, for this poem, like “The Plot against the Giant” three pages later, acts as a fable that is appropriate for various stories. Here, the possible stories include the turbulent history of Oklahoma in Stevens’ lifetime: the huge land runs of 1889 and later (50,000 people waiting at the border to stake their claims), the thirty-one bills before Congress from 1889 to 1906 on whether to make one large state of Oklahoma out of Indian Territory, that Promised Land for forcibly relocated Indians, briefly the place of a “golden age.” Or to retain half as Indian Territory.

Just as naming a place will stake a claim, so also naming a place in writing stakes a claim. But what claim here? After all, Stevens could have omitted Oklahoma altogether: *Every time the bucks went clattering, / A firecat bristled in the way.* “Oklahoma” is an Indian place-name, and aboriginal place-names implicitly raise the entire question of firstness, of originality. Poem after poem in Stevens’ *Harmonium*, especially at the beginning, implicitly raises questions of firstness, of origins, and of the complex relations between what came before us and our own interventions in time and place. History is interwoven in Stevens’ turning lines in his first poem, and that includes literary history, for he is staking a claim for his own poetry. He will return to the name “Oklahoma” once only after *Harmonium*:

The oldest-newest day is the newest alone.
The oldest-newest night does not creak by,
With lanterns, like a celestial ancientness.

Silently it heaves its youthful sleep from the sea—
The Oklahoman—the Italian blue
Beyond the horizon. . . . (CP 476)

Again, Oklahoma illustrates the paradox of old and new, here caught by two kinds of blue that are one and not one, new and old, yet neither: the Oklahoman and the Italian. "Imagine the American sky," Stevens once wrote, "or any intense as [and] savage blue" (qtd. in Filreis 17).

The place-name "Oklahoma" also exists as a rhetorical scheme, for the consonants of "bucks" "clattering" echo in the word "Oklahoma," much as Oklahoma's vowel-sounds echo in another *Harmonium* poem, "Life Is Motion," as Bonnie and Josie dance about, singing "' Ohoyaho, / Ohooo' " (CP 83). Or, for all that, much as Rodgers and Hammerstein made the vowel sounds echo in the opening of the title-chorus for their musical, *Oklahoma*—now Oklahoma's state song.¹ Rhetorical schemes can be fun. They can also be memory-places.

Oklahoma, then, exists on the first page as a place-name that refers to an actual place, a recent state (1907).² It also exists as a place-name that is a fictive construct—here, a setting for a fable, or more precisely, an anecdote. These functions are distinct, but they are not separate. That is, actual place is crucially informed by the fictive construct through which we see it, and there always is one. ("A fictive covering / Weaves always . . . from the heart and mind" [CP 396].) Think of the different fables of bucks and a firecat that might be spun by Indians and by new settlers. A rhetorical scheme is also a fictive construct, different in kind from a trope. Conversely, actual place crucially informs the anecdote here, which does not exist in an unspecified place. As with all place-names, we need a map and a little history in order to read it. Plus some knowledge of how fictive constructs work. Plus an ear that enjoys place-names for their sounds.

In what follows, I want to look briefly at place-names in general, and at Stevens' overall practice, before turning to several examples in detail. I shall focus on Stevens' art of place-names. We tend to approach his place-names disparately, reading them quite well as reference, but not (I think) testing them sufficiently as poetry. To show how a place-name invites us into, say, the history of Oklahoma is one thing. To shut down a poem's place-name, having discovered what it refers to, is another. Place-names in poems are poetic words, subject to the same discipline as all other poetic words. We want to read them in all aspects just noted—and I daresay more—observing kinds and degrees of emphasis, interrelations, and so on.

How do places get their names? Sometimes this is obvious. In North America, there is a formula of New-X, where original settlers staked their

claim, their link with the Old World, and their fresh start all at once: New Amsterdam, New York, New England, Nova Scotia. Poets aware of word roots know how place-names can reawaken history. The history of New Haven is present in its name, if we imagine well the way it was heard by its founders and compare the way someone walking through the city on an ordinary evening in 1949 might hear it. Over time, such a name can preserve a memory of the ancestral home, at least for a while. Or, until another country conquers the colony. Place-names, like dictionaries, are, among other things, a history of warfare. A settlement between two Great Lakes was named for the narrowness of the passage: Detroit, now anglicized. Settlers near the mouth of a great North American river remembered home, Orléans, also now anglicized. Or see Meron Benvenisti's compelling book, *Sacred Landscape* (2000), on the renaming of Palestinian sites after 1948, sometimes by substituting an ancient name.

But of course, there were names here already in North America, Indian names such as "Oklahoma," transliterated in various ways, translated in various ways—a complicated business. Stevens liked such names. At least one-quarter of his United States place-names are Indian. The memory of this continent's original inhabitants lives on in such names, as Lydia Huntley Sigourney says in an 1834 American poem, "Indian Names."

There are loosely fifty American place-names in Stevens' *Collected Poems*.³ The greatest number proportionately occur in *Harmonium*. There are loosely eighty non-American place-names, and their proportion per volume increases beyond an 80-50 ratio to roughly a 2-1 ratio after *Harmonium* until "The Rock." In *Parts of a World*, published in 1942, fourteen of the approximately twenty non-U.S. place-names are European, and all fourteen were then in the theater of war. What other general observations may be made? Most of Stevens' place-names are of actual places, unlike his gallery of personal names with those wonderful walking allegories: Nanzia Nunzio, Canon Aspirin, Augusta Moon, and so on. Stevens can invent fun places like Azcan or allegorical places like Oxidia and Olympia or typic places like the River R. But much more often, he works with actual place-names. The places mentioned are mostly cities, mountains, rivers, or states. Not surprisingly for a poet, rivers lead, though just by a nose (if we add place-names for sites beside a river in a river-poem, the count rises). Several names are repeated in different poems, notably Florida in the earlier work. There are eight state-names, six of them in *Harmonium*. The favorite three are easy to guess: Connecticut, Florida, and Pennsylvania, each for a different reason. Florida dominates the early work, Pennsylvania (chiefly through its local place-names) the later work. Florida presents a special case, too time-consuming to consider here. Stevens' special Florida is a place, a state of being, a muse, and a lifelong trope for the power of eros.⁴

Incidentally, I have been unable to find one place-name, Palahude. "There is an island, Palahude by name" (NA 86) comes from that marvelous series of one-line metaphors for a pineapple. I think the Wallace

Stevens Society should offer a prize for anyone who can locate Palahude in fact or fiction. The South Pacific uses *pala-* prefixes—is it there?

My first two examples illustrate two different emphases that a place-name may imply or intimate: (a) the historical, and (b) the fictive. “Variations on a Summer Day” resembles the variation form in music,⁵ a form that works well for a summer holiday, where one day flows into another as if a summer day prolonged itself with variations. Three American place-names appear, all Indian, all located in Maine, all in the area of a Stevens family holiday in mid-July of 1939. The first two sound like place-names in context; the third is free-floating and sounds a little like something from Italian cuisine: Damariscotta. Each of the three names is followed by another proper name, as if the second name glossed the first, as I think it might. The first pair are juxtaposed: “Star over Monhegan, Atlantic star” (CP 232). In 1939, to name the Atlantic, then to look at the sea repeatedly, as Stevens does in this series, invites readers not to forget Europe across that sea and close to war. Within six weeks of the family holiday, war had begun across the Atlantic, and on and under it. Stevens does not focus on this, so we need to search our critical vocabulary with care to try to indicate the tone here. Some shadow of war lies over the horizon of that summer day, if we extend our gaze far enough.

The second pair of names confirms this. “Pemaquid” is followed by something like a gloss: “Hugh March, a sergeant, a redcoat, killed” (CP 234). As critics have noted, this death could not but remind readers that other British soldiers were being killed after September 3, 1939.⁶ The third example, “Damariscotta da da doo,” is followed by “Hurroo, the man-boat comes, / In a man-makenesse, neater than Naples” (CP 235). “Neater than Naples” is puzzling. Naples is traditionally messy, so “neater” as against Mussolini’s 1939 all-too-tidy Naples? (The trains proverbially ran on time then.) Or “neater” as a neat concealing contraption, a happy childhood trick? (I know the trick from canoes.) Or “neater” etymologically as “shining,” brighter even than the fabled Bay of Naples? Perhaps Stevens is typically putting all such meanings of “neat” in play, as a mimesis of the mind’s mixed response to 1939 Naples.

“Damariscotta da da doo” is such sudden fun, a dance rhythm, an alliterative scheme, that the effect is to lighten the tone and bring us back to a summer holiday. It sets up an iambic tetrameter rhythm, along with the possibility of a refrain line (I am curious about how others hear this):

Damariscotta da da doo
You’re not ricotta da da doo
You’re a tidal river da da doo
Meaning “place of alewives”—yes, all true—
Damariscotta da da doo.

The scheme is mnemonic, as “bucks” “clattering” is not. So are some other schemes with place-names. To read Stevens’ variations in the context of all the place-names here is to enhance the sense of what he called “agreeable things.”⁷ The ordinary pleasures of life are intensely felt at a time of war, as a simple good in themselves.

A 1946 poem, “Late Hymn from the Myrrh-Mountain,” works quite differently. It starts with a flourish, that enticing erotic couplet:

Unsnack your snood, madanna, for the stars
Are shining on all brows of Neversink. (CP 349)

“Myrrh-Mountain”? “Neversink”? Given the word-play, a first-time reader says, ah yes, a Spenserian hymn, with a fanciful allegorical place. The myrrh-mountain echoes one of Western literature’s most powerful love-poems, The Song of Songs, itself much allegorized: “Until the day break and the shadows flee away, / I will get me to the mountain of myrrh” (Song of Songs 4:6); the aroma of myrrh permeates all the Canticles. And Neversink? Clearly a place of constancy, where one’s heart does not sink. Likely a mountain, because it comes with brows. The sun on the brows of a mountain does not sink until long after darkness has spread below—a handy trope for a writer.⁸

But of course, Neversink Mountain exists in actuality, on the edge of Reading, along with Mount Penn. It was known, says my old *Encyclopedia Britannica* (11th ed., 1914), for its pleasure resorts, a Xanadu of sorts. No one, having read the poem, can visit Neversink Mountain in quite the same way again. A compound ghost of Solomon with all his myrrh and Stevens’ echoing voice now hovers in, on, or about Neversink Mountain, both the name and the place. All the more if you visit it in late summer, when timothy turns brown and goes to seed, and yet more if you visit it in the late summer of your life. Yet more again, if you are a large bulky man, once nicknamed Giant, and your thoughts are running on a place of love or on a muse or on a woman. Or, for all that, if you are a woman.

Elsewhere too, Stevens enjoys making an actual place *sound* allegorical or fanciful, that is, playing on its fictive possibilities. “O thin men of Haddam” (CP 93), as Robert Pinsky once said, seems like “the stuff of fable or fairy-tale, or reminds us of the sounds of those genres embroidered through the ordinary” (32). And where does the name “Haddam” come from? Apparently from English Hadham. Stevens thought it had “a completely Yankee sound” (L 786).

Two other 1946 poems work chiefly with historical reference, one, “Extraordinary References,” less successfully than the other, “A Completely New Set of Objects.” In “Extraordinary References,” the four proper names are the name of a child (Jacomyntje), a people (Indian), a place (Tulpehocken), and a minor Roman god of the changing seasons (Vertumnus). A father has been killed, presumably in World War II. Three kinds of proper

names: Dutch, Indian, Roman—three civilizations, like the “child’s three ribbons” (CP 369). Both conquerors and conquered, they live on in proper names. The trope of braided be-ribboned hair that opens and closes the poem suggests the interwoven strands of history and individual lives, past and present, continuity and change, and also of poetic lines. If the sentence “And she has peace” (CP 369) sounds a little too easy, a little unearned, still, where is comfort to be found for such a person except in a child and by looking over the long span of history? That long span lives on in the names here.

Yet the poem seems flawed to me because the fictive construct of conqueror versus conquered is unclear. Unless, of course, the phrase “Indian fighter” is ambiguous:

The mother ties the hair-ribbons of the child
And she has peace. *My Jacomyntje!*
Your great-grandfather was an Indian fighter. (CP 369)

The problem is how far and why the mother takes comfort in belonging to a line of warriors. That is, what relation is there between fighting Nazis and fighting Indians as you invade their country? All this changes if the great-grandfather was himself an Indian, defending his territory.

The poem “A Completely New Set of Objects” taught me one more function of place-names in poetry. To my chagrin, I had to find out how to pronounce the name “Schuylkill” for this paper—I, who delight in the sounds of poetry and like to think I am a stickler for accuracy. Alas, I had been pronouncing Schuylkill in my head any which way. So, Webster’s handy pronouncing *Geographical Dictionary* or the equivalent needs to be added to a map and a good historical reference book. But that is not the end of it. Educated Philadelphians say “Skoolkill,” while some locals apparently say “Skookill,” and “Skykill” has also been reported.⁹ How *do* we pronounce that name? And what are the implications for a line of poetry?

“A Completely New Set of Objects” is only one of a series of remarkable river poems that Stevens wrote in the last decade of his life: “The Countryman,” “Metaphor as Degeneration,” and so on. Actual river and fictive construct have different relations in these poems, as does rhetorical scheme. The sounds of Swatara start off “The Countryman” with a refrain effect very different from that of Damariscotta: “Swatara, Swatara, black river, / . . . Swatara, Swatara, heavy the hills” (CP 428). The word “swarthy” then takes up the echo. Ten words in total, emphatically placed, with the poem ending on “a swarthy name.” Stevens, like Spenser and Tennyson, a master of charm effects in poetry here writes incantatory, repetitive, lulling charm verse. The poem addresses a Pennsylvania river, and, like a charm, calls up the word “swarthy” from the sounds and sense of “Swatara, Swatara, black river.” If the place-name “Swatara” does not mean “black” or “swarthy,” then it should.¹⁰

The scheme is briefly repeated in "Metaphor as Degeneration":

It is certain that the river

Is not Swatara. The swarthy water
That flows round the earth and through the skies,
Twisting among the universal spaces,

Is not Swatara. It is being. (*CP* 444)

Both poems anticipate "The River of Rivers in Connecticut": "The Countryman" through its black river (color of the River Styx), its use of address, and its refrain effects; "Metaphor as Degeneration" through its sense of being and its metamorphosis of a river into water like the circumambient Oceanus of classical times.

"Thinking of a Relation Between the Images of Metaphors" starts with a place-name: "The wood-doves are singing along the Perkiomen. / The bass lie deep, still afraid of the Indians" (*CP* 356). History is part of the Perkiomen, implicitly as biography,¹¹ explicitly in the word "Indian" and also explicitly in the sense of memory—not human but piscatory memory, instinctive. As elsewhere, especially with work in the 1940s and 1950s, Stevens enters a place-name, so to speak, and makes ordinary place also extraordinary. Because he is a writer, a poet, the extraordinary life he knows best is that life, and it slowly comes to focus in this poem, in an intense point of concentration. The poem moves, itself like both fish and fisherman. It moves from the act of fishing toward the act of making poetry, and thereby away from Perkiomen as reference and toward the making of a fictive construct. Yet the poem is anchored by the actual Perkiomen, much as Yeats's ideal fisherman, at once existing and not existing, is anchored by that "grey Connemara cloth" (146). The poet repeatedly searches for the perfect metaphor, fishing, looking, listening, spearing, fixing. In the play between fish and fisherman, flux and fixity, the poem resembles "The Motive for Metaphor." It also lies behind that great poem, "The River of Rivers in Connecticut," where the sense of extraordinary energy and concentration belongs, not to a fisherman-artist, but to any human being.

Writers help to make a place. It is not too much to say that Stevens has helped to make America through his work with place-names. Less so in the early work, despite that amazing female, Florida. Rather in the late work, especially with Pennsylvania and Connecticut. The place-names of his rivers and streams read like a Homeric catalogue of Stevens' works and days: Perkiomen, Swatara, Schuylkill, Tulpehocken, Connecticut. Back we go to maps of these places, foreigners and Americans alike, first to find where Tinicum and Farmington are. Then to brood on the large river systems that run through a state, offering sites for settlement in the days of water transport. To brood also on their history from aboriginal times to

colonial times to the present day. And to pronounce these names, to listen to the fictive constructs by which they live, to sing and dance with them, to call them out.

There is a great river, this side of Stygia,
.....

that river, far this side of Stygia,
.....

Call it, once more, a river, an unnamed flowing. . . .

(CP 533)

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Notes

¹Or much as Ohio could evolve into “Why oh why oh why oh, / Why did I ever leave Ohio?” or “New York, New York” become a percussive beat.

²Its placing and its provenance raise questions of firstness and originality at large, whether vis-à-vis history or vis-à-vis writing. Its signification of “red men” or “land of red men” may do so also.

³Loosely because the count is my own informal count, based on an index to proper names that I scribbled years ago on the end pages of *Collected Poems*. Loosely also because only nouns are counted (with a very few exceptions), even though adjectives (e.g., “French”) carry some sense of a place. Loosely also because large regions like “the North” and “the South” are also omitted. So are fanciful or allegorical names.

⁴Stevens testified that he once found Florida “violently affective” (L 450). See my “The Play and War of Venus: Love Poems and Florida Poems,” especially 66–72.

⁵See Frye, “Wallace Stevens and the Variation Form.” See also Elaine Sisman’s informative entry on “Variation” in *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music*.

⁶It hardly needed Holly Stevens’ verification, but there it is in the person of a young Royal Air Force officer and his wife on their honeymoon, staying at the same inn as the Stevens family (“Holidays in Reality” 109). She records that her father spent time with the couple in long conversations.

⁷Stevens’ letters during the fall of 1939 are full of references to the war, with which this poem is connected as a contrary. This kind of poem “also has its justifications,” he wrote on December 29, 1939. “In a world permanently enigmatical, to hear and see agreeable things involves something more than mere imagism” (L 346).

⁸See Bates 289, on the mist from the Schuylkill that often shrouds this mountain.

⁹Willard Spiegelman mentioned to me that well-educated Philadelphians of a much older generation said “Skookill” too. And what was the early Dutch pronunciation?

¹⁰In fact, the meaning of this Indian name is said to be uncertain. But then, a false, let alone an uncertain, etymology may please a poet as much as it vexes a lexicographer.

¹¹“Perkiomen” is a creek downstream from Stevens’ grandfather’s farm “famous for its bass.” “All his life long my father used to fish the Perkiomen for bass,” Stevens wrote in 1942 (Holly Stevens, *Souvenirs and Prophecies* 5).

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Verbs of Mere Being: A Defense of Stevens' Style

ROGER GILBERT

THE LATE A. R. AMMONS was never shy about criticizing other poets, however formidable their reputations. Among his favorite targets was Wallace Stevens, of whom he once said in an interview, "I think he is a great poet who sometimes writes below the level of a high-school freshman" (White 16). While invariably acknowledging Stevens' greatness, Ammons loved to complain about what he saw as his stylistic shortcomings, chief among them his heavy reliance on the verb "to be." The poet John Brehm recalls that Ammons would "read a passage from Stevens and point out all the weak verbs, 'is, is, is, was, was, was, like a bunch of fuckin' bees buzzin' around in there'" (70). (Stevensians will note that the pun on "be" and "bee" is lifted from "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," "It Must Change," canto II.) Ammons elaborated this critique in a section of his long poem *Glare*:

it seems even with Mr.

Stevens that he was a poet when he
was scarcely himself: he made

being verbs of being: his head buzzed
wuz, wuz, wuz, wuz, although,

nodding, he sometimes slipped an active
verb through. . . . (25)¹

I often heard Archie give some version of this spiel in the Temple of Zeus, the Cornell coffee shop where he held court every morning. Devoted though I was to Stevens, I never mustered the courage or wit on those occasions to mount a defense of his style. Here at last I have my opportunity, although it feels a bit disloyal to take it now that Archie is gone. But I console myself by recalling a passage from later in *Glare*, in which Ammons himself seems to hint at the possibility of a defense:

someday
I'm going to write on how Stevens
makes his *be* buzz. . . . (134)

My aim in this paper, then, is to take up the task that Ammons left undone, to show how Stevens makes his *be* buzz—that is, how he infuses this most static of verbs with a range of affective and semantic intensities that keep it always alive and in motion.

Before turning to Stevens' poetry, I should point out that Ammons' distaste for verbs of being is by no means eccentric. Indeed the badness of "to be" is something like an article of faith in the teaching of both expository and creative writing. The granddaddy of all style manuals, Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*, rails against passive "to be" constructions, insisting that "Many a tame sentence of description or exposition can be made lively and emphatic by substituting a transitive in the active voice for some such perfunctory expression as *there is*, or *could be heard*" (14). Richard Lanham's *Revising Prose* is even more forthright in condemning "that all-purpose epoxy 'is,' " calling it "the weakest verb in the language," and asserting that sentences that use it "project no life, no vigor" (3). Lanham espouses a "paramedic method" for revising prose, one of whose basic steps is to "circle the 'is' forms" (10), with the aim of substituting active verbs wherever possible. I too have absorbed this dogma. Marking student papers, I sometimes find myself circling every occurrence of "it is" and "there is" with gritted teeth, fuming at the laziness and ineptitude of my pupils.

Both in its pedagogical and poetic manifestations, the prejudice against verbs of being reflects a deeply American bias toward action, energy, and what Lanham calls "vigor." From this perspective, sentences in their ideal form describe actions rather than states, objects, or ideas, and so are always strongly verb-centered. Certainly Ammons' own poetry is dominated by verbs of action. Words like "whirl," "whip," "strike," and "turn" are everywhere in his early poems; and while his later work does incorporate a higher proportion of discursive "is" phrases, it continues to favor dynamic verbs, in keeping with Ammons' lifelong commitment to a poetics of motion.² For Stevens too, as the title of an early poem puts it, "Life Is Motion"; yet one cannot help noticing that in the very act of proclaiming this Emersonian view, he characteristically relies on the word "is." This paradox is, I think, a deep and defining one for Stevens' poetry. Profoundly invested in ideas of flux, transformation, and imaginative agency, Stevens nevertheless tends to frame his apprehensions of the world's becoming in verbs of being.

In a recent review of Howard Nemerov's *Selected Poems*, William Logan lists among that poet's bad habits his addiction to the "cholesterol of 'to be' verbs" (88). By that analogy, Stevens' poetry would be the equivalent

of a steak dinner with cheesecake for dessert. Through the aid of the invaluable Internet database Literature Online, I have tallied occurrences of the various "is" forms in his *Collected Poems*, and the results appear to confirm Ammons' claim that Stevens' "head buzzed / wuz, wuz, wuz." By my calculations there are 2,997 verbs of being in the book out of a total word count of 80,772, which means that roughly one in every twenty-seven words in *The Collected Poems* is some form of "to be." Although I have not been able to ascertain the frequency of "to be" in English usage generally, this strikes me as a very high ratio, one that might well justify a prescription of poetic Lipitor.

Not all *is*'s are created equal, of course. The bland familiarity of this most neutral of verbs masks a surprising range of uses and functions. As linguists and philosophers have long observed, "to be" possesses two fundamental meanings, each of which ramifies into a host of finer nuances. As a copula or linking verb, "is" and its variants serve to join a subject and predicate on the basis of equivalence. In copulative sentences the predicate may name a quality or attribute of the subject ("the grass is green"), a category to which it belongs ("spinach is a vegetable"), or some other relationship of identity. As an intransitive verb, on the other hand, "is" names the sheer state of existence or being, although it rarely occurs in the grammatically pure form "x is"; ontological assertions are usually mediated by an expletive such as "there" or "it," as in "there is water on Mars." In her recent study *Wallace Stevens' Experimental Language*, Beverly Maeder deftly analyzes the rich interplay between these distinct senses of "is" in Stevens' poetry. Drawing on Derrida's important essay "The Supplement of Copula," Maeder shows that Stevens' copulative phrases often carry complex ontological resonances. Maeder takes as one of her examples the famous closing line of "The Snow Man": "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (CP 10), in which the final "is" hovers ambiguously between its locative and existential registers (103).

The most distinctively poetic use of the copula occurs in metaphors, where the equivalence of subject and predicate is figurative rather than literal. Although copulative metaphors do appear in Stevens, they are by no means the only or even the most characteristic form the trope takes in his work. As critics have long recognized, Stevens often prefers to construct metaphors through apposition, as in phrases such as "The sun, that brave man" (CP 138). In fact, Stevens' use of "to be" tends much more toward the minimal and the prosaic. Most discussions of Stevens' diction focus on its florabundant side and emphasize his seemingly inexhaustible supply of eccentric words, often culled from other languages.³ Yet, as Maeder suggests, much of Stevens' poetry lays bare "the functional core of English" (6), calling attention to the minute parts of speech upon which our understandings of self and world depend. Even the definite article is foregrounded in the famous concluding line of "The Man on the Dump": "Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the" (CP 203). My concern

here is with the verb “to be” in its most innocuous guise, not as a copula linking sharply defined clauses, but as a component of simple pronoun phrases such as “It is,” “There is,” and “This is.” Such phrases appear everywhere in Stevens’ poetry, stitching together his more colorful locutions with their invisible thread. But while their ubiquity may indeed be taken by some as a stylistic weakness, I believe a close consideration will show that Stevens deploys them with great skill and subtlety, and that their function is seldom purely grammatical.

By my calculations, roughly a third of the occurrences of “to be” in *The Collected Poems* are preceded by “it,” “there,” “this,” or “here.”⁴ (“That” presents a somewhat different case, since it can function as either a demonstrative or a relative pronoun.) When used in conjunction with “is,” such words are known to linguists as “dummy subjects,” since they have no semantic content but merely serve as placeholders.⁵ Even within this seemingly narrow range of usage, many variables present themselves, including tense, mood, person, and number, all of which Stevens manipulates for rhetorical effect. Such differences are accentuated by the extreme irregularity of “to be,” whose various forms are distinct not only grammatically but also phonetically: “be,” “is,” “are,” “am,” “was,” “were” all have very different *sounds*. Through careful modulation and inflection, Stevens makes “to be” a surprisingly sensitive instrument for registering the finer shades of meaning and affect.

By far the most common “is” phrase in Stevens is “it is,” which occurs in *The Collected Poems* a total of 343 times, or more than once per poem.⁶ Although “it” may in some instances refer to an antecedent clause, more often it functions as an expletive or dummy subject. “Description without Place” opens with a veritable swarm of such phrases: “It is possible that to seem—it is to be, / As the sun is something seeming and it is” (CP 339). By using a dash to separate “that to seem” from its verb clause, Stevens sets up the almost perverse repetition of “it is” within the first line, then further accentuates the phrase by repeating it in a metrically strong position at the end of line two. I blush to imagine what might happen to these lines were they submitted to a writing workshop; suffice it to say that they seem far removed from the canons of vigor and concision that generally govern in the classroom. Yet Stevens clearly intends his “it is”s as more than either metrical or grammatical filler. The phrase continues to show up regularly throughout the poem, culminating in the climactic declaration that “It is a world of words to the end of it” (CP 345). In its very vagueness, “it is” captures the dislocated power of description at its most elemental, as the sheer positing of existence and attribute—a power that Stevens consistently sets against the epistemological lucidity of the more guarded copula “seems.”⁷

“It is” also plays a key role in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” occurring nineteen times in the course of the poem. Let me cite only the seven instances from “It Must Be Abstract”:

In the difficulty of what *it is* to be (CP 381)
It is the celestial ennui of apartments (CP 381)
It is desire at the end of winter (CP 382)
 And hard *it is* in spite of blazoned days (CP 383)
 It feels good as *it is* without the giant (CP 386)
It is he (CP 389)
It is of him, ephebe, to make, to confect
 The final elegance. (CP 389; emphasis added)

This cento illustrates the shifting place of “it is” in Stevens, at times barely discernible within a complex hypotactic construction (“the difficulty of what it is to be”), at others sharply foregrounded as a short sentence’s main clause (“It is he”). The steady reiteration of this phrase and its variants helps to establish the poem’s essential rhythm of incremental definition. One might say that “It is” serves as the poem’s most basic unit or “note,” both in the musical and discursive sense.

“There is” also occurs regularly in Stevens’ poetry, though not nearly as often as “it is.” Like “it,” “there” usually functions as an expletive or dummy subject rather than a demonstrative pronoun. Yet the phrase’s latent deictic force makes it more pointed than “it is” and allows it to assume a greater topographic and historical specificity, especially when put in the past tense, as in “It Must Be Abstract,” canto IV: “There was a muddy centre before we breathed. / There was a myth before the myth began” (CP 383). Past and present forms of the phrase are juxtaposed in canto I: “There was a project for the sun and is. / There is a project for the sun” (CP 381). Here the movement from “there was” to “there is” enacts the cleansing and revitalizing of myth that “Notes” as a whole proposes. The relatively mild deictic charge of “there is” heightens in phrases such as “that is,” “here is,” and “this is,” all of which appear in Stevens at moments of rhetorical intensity. The contracted exclamation “That’s it” occurs at climactic points in “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” and “A Primitive Like an Orb,” in each case signaling the arrival of a formula that temporarily satisfies the questing mind. “Here is” appears in the final canto of “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” where it announces the birth of a new immanence: “Here is the bread of time to come. / Here is its actual stone” (CP 183–84). Most powerfully, the insistent repetition of “This is” lends the first canto of “The Auroras of Autumn” a dramatic immediacy without precedent in Stevens’ poetry:

This is where the serpent lives, the bodiless. . . .
Or is this another wriggling out of the egg. . . .?
This is where the serpent lives. This is his nest. . . .

This is form gulping after formlessness. . . .
This is the height emerging and its base. . . .
This is his poison: that we should disbelieve
Even that. (CP 411; emphasis added)

The plural form of the phrase, "these are," has a similar gestural power in Stevens: "These are the measures destined for her soul" (CP 67); "These are the heroic children whom time breeds / Against the first idea" (CP 385); "These are the edgings and inchings of final form" (CP 488); "These are death's own supremest images" (CP 436).

Where these deictic phrases deploy "to be" as an engine of pure assertion, Stevens often tempers or qualifies that assertive force through the use of auxiliary verbs. "Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu" poignantly cloaks its expression of mortal transience in the conditional "would": "That would be waving and that would be crying, . . . / And that would be saying farewell, repeating farewell" (CP 127). In "Paisant Chronicle," the shift from "may" to "must" allows Stevens to negotiate the liminal zone between possibility and necessity:

But see him for yourself,
The fictive man. He may be seated in
A café. There may be a dish of country cheese
And a pineapple on the table. It must be so. (CP 335)

"Must be" here takes on an almost desperate edge, registering the will to believe as it pushes against skeptical defenses. Similar movements from guarded conjecture to fervent declaration occur in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," again articulated by shifts in the form of the verb: "He is and may be but oh! he is, he is" (CP 388); "It is possible, possible, possible. It must / Be possible" (CP 404). The contamination of thought by desire is made palpable in these lines largely by the changing inflection of "to be."

All the forms I have been considering separately come together in two great passages, each the climax of a long poem, in each of which Stevens masterfully directs a series of "is" phrases toward a hard-won affirmation. The famous canto VIII of "It Must Give Pleasure" joins interrogative and declarative, first and third person, expletive and substantive, existential and copulative "to be" phrases to form something like a musical chord progression.

What *am I* to believe? If the angel in his cloud,
Serenely gazing at the violent abyss,
Plucks on his strings to pluck abysmal glory,

Leaps downward through evening's revelations, and
On his spredden wings, needs nothing but deep space,

Forgets the gold centre, the golden destiny,

Grows warm in the motionless motion of his flight,
Am I that imagine this angel less satisfied?
Are the wings his, the lapis-haunted air?

Is it he or *is it* I that experience this?
Is it I then that keep saying *there is* an hour
Filled with expressible bliss, in which I have

No need, *am* happy, forget need's golden hand,
Am satisfied without solacing majesty,
And if *there is* an hour *there is* a day,

There is a month, a year, *there is* a time
In which *majesty is* a mirror of the self:
I have not but *I am* and as *I am*, *I am*.

(CP 404–05; emphasis added)

The “to be” phrases in this passage form an almost palindromic sequence (“am I . . . ? Am I . . . ? Are the wings . . . ? Is it . . . is it? Is it . . . there is . . . I . . . am . . . am . . . there is . . . majesty is . . . I am . . . I am, I am”) that pivots on the seemingly neutral phrases “is it” and “there is,” while opening outward on either side to take in such transcendental terms as “wings,” “majesty,” and that supremest of all Stevensian fictions, “I.” Many critics have analyzed the canto’s exquisitely modulated movement from tentative questioning to triumphant assertion; I will simply point out that the primary vehicle for this movement is the lowly and maligned verb of being, which here assumes an almost magic elasticity and force.

My second passage comes from canto VIII of “The Auroras of Autumn,” and although it contains a much narrower range of “is” phrases, it is no less affecting in its struggle toward a pure statement of being:

There may be always a time of innocence.
There is never a place. Or if *there is* no time,
If *it is* not a thing of time, nor of place,

Existing in the idea of it, alone,
In the sense against calamity, *it is* not
Less real. For the oldest and coldest philosopher,

There is or *may be* a time of innocence
As pure principle. *Its nature is* its end,
That *it should be*, and yet *not be*, a thing

That pinches the pity of the pitiful man,
Like a book at evening beautiful but untrue,
Like a book on rising beautiful and true.

It is like a thing of ether that exists
Almost as predicate. But it exists,
It exists, *it is* visible, *it is*, *it is*. (CP 418)

Here the drama of the mind in the act of finding what will suffice reveals itself chiefly in the gradual stripping away of the conditional verbs “may” and “should” and the negative adverbs “never” and “not,” a process that culminates in the complete simplicity of the existential “it is.” Stevens calls special attention to the role of “is” in the passage by describing the time of innocence as a “thing of ether that exists / Almost as predicate.” Although he presumably means “predicate” in the sense of a logical supposition upon which subsequent thoughts and actions depend, its grammatical meaning as the object of an “is” sentence cannot be escaped, subtly acknowledging that the only foundation for this vision of innocence is the predicative power of “is” itself.

I would like to end by briefly considering two of Stevens’ late lyrics that together illustrate the paradoxical intrication of being and becoming in his work. The poems are “Reality Is an Activity of the Most August Imagination” and “Of Mere Being.” As their titles suggest, both poems present what we might call ontological anecdotes, but while the former unfolds a turbulent vision of motion or process, the latter evokes a scene of uncanny stasis. Yet the grammar of the two poems seems to pull against their respective ontologies: the first is dominated by verbs of being, while the second relies mainly on active verbs, incorporating just one “is” phrase.

“Reality Is an Activity of the Most August Imagination” consists of six complete sentences, counting the title, all but one of which have as their main verb a form of “is.” The exception is the first sentence, a simple narrative statement establishing the basic action that underlies and informs all the poem’s images, that of driving.

Last Friday, in the big light of last Friday night,
We drove home from Cornwall to Hartford, late. (OP 135)

I can think of no other work that so vividly captures the faintly hallucinatory character of a nocturnal car ride, its way of persuading us that we are sitting still while the world swirls around us.⁸ This peculiar sense of stillness at the eye of a storm may help account for Stevens’ insistent use of static verbs. Only the title uses the present tense form of “is,” in keeping with its timelessly propositional character. The body of the poem is dominated by the past tense “was,” which serves to locate its particu-

lars in a specific moment while maintaining a retrospective distance from that occasion.

It was not a night blown at a glassworks in Vienna
Or Venice, motionless, gathering time and dust.

There was a crush of strength in a grinding going round,
Under the front of the westward evening star,

The vigor of glory, a glittering in the veins,
As things emerged and moved and were dissolved,

Either in distance, change or nothingness,
The visible transformations of summer night,

An argentine abstraction approaching form
And suddenly denying itself away.

There was an insolid billowing of the solid.
Night's moonlight lake was neither water nor air. (*OP* 135–36)

The visionary core of the poem is framed by two sentences of negation—"It was not a night blown in a glassworks . . ."; "Night's moonlight lake was neither water nor air"—but the core itself consists of two extraordinary sentences, each beginning with the phrase "There was." The most striking fact about these two sentences is the disparity in their length. The first is one of Stevens' magnificently exfoliating displays of trope-making, eight lines of headlong apposition and modification that paint a vision of space and motion one can only call the *Automotive Sublime*. The second sentence encapsulates that vision in a single line that is a triumph of diction: "There was an insolid billowing of the solid." Both sentences are charged with motion and energy, as reflected in a plethora of participles and nominalized verbs: "crush," "grinding," "going," "emerged," "moved," "dissolved," "approaching," "denying," "billowing." Yet both take as their main clauses that allegedly tepid, lifeless locution "There was." If we try to imagine alternative phrases, one possibility that immediately suggests itself is "I saw," with its prophetic overtones from the *Book of Revelation*. Indeed "there was" might be said to carry a trace memory of "I saw" within itself, through the reversal of "saw" in "was." But Stevens seldom goes in for self-dramatization; "I saw" puts too much emphasis on the receiver of vision, not enough on the vision itself. Where a contemporary poet might omit the subject-verb clause altogether and simply present a series of grammatical fragments—"a crush of strength," "an insolid billowing," etc.—Stevens values the slight insulation that "there was" provides against the live voltage of the night and its incessant trans-

formations. The poem's four "was"'s serve as precarious points of stability within an overwhelmingly volatile scene.

Finally, let me say a word about one of Stevens' greatest short lyrics, the late "Of Mere Being." Despite the poem's titular emphasis on being, its eight sentences, which range in length from half a line to three, all have active main verbs: "rises," "Sings," "know," "sings," "shine," "stands," "moves," "dangle." The poem's only verb of being is secreted in a subordinate clause: "You know then that *it is* not the reason / That makes us happy or unhappy" (OP 141).⁹ More perhaps than any other late poem, "Of Mere Being" partakes of what Stevens calls "the essential gaudiness of poetry" (L 263), especially in the unforgettable exuberance of its final line: "The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down" (OP 141). Yet I want to suggest that that single "it is" discreetly nestled at the heart of the poem does not represent a simple lapse of Stevens' verbal imagination, as my late friend Archie Ammons might have believed, but is a necessary component of the poem's inner workings. For Stevens, the essential gaudiness of poetry depends on what he elsewhere calls "the essential prose" (CP 36), a discursive web of functional words and phrases—"it is," "there is," "and yet," "as if," and many others—that serve both to connect and to separate the tropes, fictions, and flourishes bred by the imagination, enfolded in the syntax of reflection. The singing of the gold-feathered bird may be what we listen for when we read Stevens, but somewhere in the background we always also hear the buzzing of his "be"'s.

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Notes

¹As this passage from *Glare* continues, Ammons conjugates the verb into what he calls "these linked equivalences, / were, been, was, is, are, be, you / name it," before derisively turning his apiarian trope against the poet's prepositional phrases ("whoever / could muster a hive of *in the's* and / *of the's* like Mr. Stevens") (25).

²A poem called "Postulation" from Ammons' collection *Sumerian Vistas* nicely illustrates his penchant for infusing being with motion:

I place my *be* down,
but it
buzzes as on a
hotplate: I lift it,

a clear
drop, and
place it shining down
again, but

it steams and stews:
be, I say: it runs:
be, I say: it
hisses dry. (85)

³The most systematic discussion of Stevens' diction I know is Marie Borroff's chapter "Wallace Stevens's World of Words: The Uses of Diction," in her *Language and the Poet*.

⁴Here is a quantitative breakdown of the occurrences of the three most common forms of "to be"—"is," "was," and "are"—in *The Collected Poems*, as preceded by the expletives "it," "there," "this," "here," and "these":

All occurrences of "is": 1331
"It is": 319
"There is": 77
"This is": 54
"Here is": 8
Total "[expletive] is": 458

All occurrences of "was": 468
"It was": 115
"There was": 39
"This was": 12
"Here was": 4
Total "[expletive] was": 170

All occurrences of "are": 376
"These are": 26
"There are": 37
"Here are": 3
Total "[expletive] are": 66

Several auditors of this paper suggested to me that the high incidence of such "is" phrases in Stevens stems from the influence of French idioms on his style. Certainly his frequent use of "it is" and "this is" may have found sanction in the ubiquitous French "il est" and "c'est." But not all French equivalents for common English "is" phrases use the verb "être"; "there is" corresponds to "il y a," "here is" to "voilà." So although Stevens' reliance on such phrases may indeed reflect his infatuation with the French language, the prominence of "to be" in his writing goes well beyond its normative role in French.

⁵I am grateful to my colleague Stuart Davis for introducing me to the related linguistic notions of expletives and dummy subjects.

⁶Stevens almost never uses the contraction "it's," preferring the subtly iambic "it is." Of the three exceptions in *The Collected Poems*, one is a quotation from Williams ("It's a strange courage / you give me, ancient star" [CP 18]); the other two occur in "Sailing after Lunch," where they comport with that poem's relatively clipped lines and sardonic tone.

⁷Stevens limns the dichotomy of being and seeming most memorably in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," in a line that foregrounds the verb "to be" through repetition: "Let be be finale of seem" (CP 64).

⁸Lisa Steinman suggested to me that the poem in fact describes the Northern Lights, a highly plausible conjecture given its seasonal and geographical setting. Yet while much of the poem's language and imagery strikingly echo those of "The Auroras of Autumn," the telltale word "things" in the line "As things emerged and moved and were dissolved" (OP 136) suggests a more physically embodied vision of flux. For Stevens, as for Williams, the word "thing" nearly always connotes substance and solidity.

⁹In her commentary on the poem, Eleanor Cook discerns a kind of latent "is" that emerges from an "implicit pun . . . on the word 'phoenix,' which is what this fiery bird is":

The Greek word for this fabulous sacred bird is also used for a date-palm. The bird "sings in the palm" and through a pun *is* the palm. So also the poem is contained in its words or its leaves, and vice versa; it also *is* its words or leaves. So also space is contained in the mind, and vice versa; it also *is* the mind. (312)

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Stevens' Soldier Poems and Historical Possibility

MILTON J. BATES

WHAT DO WE TALK ABOUT when we talk about Wallace Stevens and history? The one-word answer to that question is "politics," to judge from criticism published during the last two decades. The two terms are conflated even in the way we frame the discussion. At the 1988 Modern Language Association convention in New Orleans, the Wallace Stevens Society sponsored a panel entitled "Stevens in History." When the *Wallace Stevens Journal* published those papers in a special issue the following fall, together with several other contributions, the title became "Stevens and Politics." From this we might infer that the poet who is "in history" writes about the political events and controversies of the day.

For most people, the philosopher Karl Popper once observed, history is more or less the record of political power and how it has been used (*Open Society II*: 257). In literary studies this popular notion of history was theorized in the early 1980s as the New Historicism, which gave a political—often a Marxist—edge to more traditional forms of historical scholarship and commentary. In this critical climate Stevens' work initially suffered by comparison with that of his more engagé contemporaries. Marjorie Perloff repeated the Stevens-as-aesthete mantra, long a commonplace in Stevens criticism, in her 1985 essay "Revolving in Crystal: The Supreme Fiction and the Impasse of Modernist Lyric." By the time of the 1988 MLA panel, however, it was clear that a revolution had taken place in Stevens studies, and it was not a revolution in crystal. Historically informed criticism published during the 1980s and 1990s portrayed a poet who read the daily newspaper carefully and responded at least obliquely to its content.

This vein can still be mined for valuable nuggets, as Jacqueline Brogan's recent book, *The Violence Within/The Violence Without*, demonstrates. But we have clearly reached a point of diminishing returns—a point, that is, where most of Stevens' topical references have been identified and scrutinized. The politically engaged Stevens has become as much a critical cliché as the deconstructionist Stevens of the 1970s. The time has come to reconsider his relation to history and politics. I propose to make a modest beginning by looking at a group of poems that I will call the "soldier poems." Though Stevens had no military experience himself and evinced little interest in military history, he wrote poems about soldiers during all phases

of his career. The book-length studies by James Longenbach and Alan Filreis provide detailed historical exposition of these poems. Taking their scholarship as my point of departure, I contend that Stevens was far less interested in the politics of history than he was in its moral possibilities. That interest reflects, in turn, an "open" or non-determinist sense of history.

First, a word about the frequency and distribution of the soldier poems. The word "soldier" (or "soldiers") appears in eighteen poems. Another dozen refer to military combatants by other terms.¹ For the sake of comparison, we might notice that the rabbi, another persona whom Stevens invests with moral authority, appears in seven poems. The first of the soldier poems is "Phases," published in 1914; the last is "A Clear Day and No Memories," published in 1955. Most, predictably, are concentrated in the two world war periods.

To begin with World War I: We know that Stevens was preoccupied with death during the war, on one occasion having to apologize to Harriet Monroe for dwelling on this morbid topic during a conversation. "The subject absorbs me," he told Monroe, "but that is no excuse: there are too many people in the world, vitally involved, to whom it is infinitely more than a thing to think of" (L 206). Death is one of the things that he thinks about in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" (1918), which is ostensibly about love at middle age. It is also, strangely, about war. In canto IX the speaker mocks his paramour, whom he addresses as a "ward of Cupido," with an analogy that marries Mars to Venus:

In verses wild with motion, full of din,
Loudened by cries, by clashes, quick and sure
As the deadly thought of men accomplishing
Their curious fates in war, come, celebrate
The faith of forty. . . . (CP 16)

It would be useless to counsel this speaker to make love, not war, for he is too preoccupied with mortality to feel desire. Even his companion's erotic overtures will sound, in his ears, like the cries of men dying on a battlefield.

In the early poems that address war directly, such as "Phases" and "Lettres d'un Soldat" (1918), Stevens does not represent soldiers as active agents, much less as figures of erotic vitality. Rather, they are passive victims of fate and force whose role is to die and thereby to testify to a naturalistic view of the human condition. Borrowing a phrase from Simone Weil's classic meditation on the *Iliad*, published some years later, we might even describe these as "poems of force." Force is not the whole story for Weil, who also attends to those "luminous moments" in the *Iliad* when Homer's warriors manage to repossess their souls (Weil 27). Stevens likewise grants his working-class soldier a brief moment of heroic self-transcendence:

Death's nobility again
Beautified the simplest men.
Fallen Winkle felt the pride
Of Agamemnon
When he died.

What could London's
Work and waste
Give him—
To that salty, sacrificial taste?

What could London's
Sorrow bring—
To that short, triumphant sting? ("Phases" V; *OP* 10–11)

As Stevens acknowledged, death was merely a thing to think of and talk about when he wrote these poems. Shortly afterward, in May of 1919, he learned that his younger sister, Mary Katharine, had died while serving with the Red Cross in France. He was, he told his wife, "completely done up" (*L* 212) by the news, which does not register—directly, at least—in his poetry. Mary Katharine's death was as close as he ever came personally to the experience at the center of his soldier poems.

During World War II his family connections to the war were more remote. He followed, at a distance, the fortunes of his nephew John Bergen Stevens, Jr., and his niece's husband, Hayward Stone, both of whom served in the army and survived the war. The soldier poems of this period repeat themes from the earlier group. Force and fate receive their due in "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War" (1942), whose first two sentences begin, "Force is my lot" and "Death is my / Master" (*CP* 273). "Repetitions of a Young Captain" (1944) likewise exhorts us to "Discover / A civil nakedness in which to be, / In which to bear with the exactest force / The precisions of fate" (*CP* 310). There is room in these poems, too, for self-transcendence. Like Winkle in "Phases," the soldiers of "Gigantomachia" (1943) acquire gigantic stature through participation in war. The soldiers in the World War II group, like their comrades in the World War I poems, remain mute. Their job is to die so that the poet can fulfill his role as elegist, a role that Stevens undertook with mixed results in the canto of "Esthétique du Mal" beginning, "How red the rose that is the soldier's wound" (*CP* 318).

Yet there is a significant new element in the later poems. Whereas the Great War group locates the soldier in a closed world governed by fate and force, the later poems probe history for its openings and possibilities. To illustrate the difference between closed and open history, let us consider a poem from each period. Here is the opening stanza of canto XI of "Lettres d'un Soldat," reprinted in the second edition of *Harmonium* (1931) as "The Death of a Soldier":

Life contracts and death is expected,
As in a season of autumn.
The soldier falls. (*OP* 35; *CP* 97)

The remaining tercets represent the soldier's death as natural and inevitable, like a change of season. It is "absolute and without memorial"—except, of course, for the memorial that is the poem itself. Twenty-seven years later, in canto III of "Description without Place," we have this contrasting view of the soldier's death:

There are potential seemings turbulent
In the death of a soldier, like the utmost will,

The more than human commonplace of blood,
The breath that gushes upward and is gone,

And another breath emerging out of death,
That speaks for him such seemings as death gives. (*CP* 341)

How might we account for this change in Stevens' sense of history? I suspect that the answer lies in the intervening decade of the 1930s, when the literary left compelled him to reflect on paradigms of historical change. Marxism, Karl Popper argued in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945), was the most recent manifestation of the phenomenon he called historicism, by which he meant any attempt to derive quasi-scientific laws of change from the past and project them into the future. Stevens anticipated Popper's critique in "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue" (1936), which depicts a world that moves inexorably "from waste / To waste, out of the hopeless waste of the past / Into a hopeful waste to come" (*OP* 81).

In contrast to the Marxists, Stevens came to regard historical change not as the product of material conditions, immanent laws, or transcendent agency but rather as the outcome of ceaseless negotiation between the human mind and the conditions in which it finds itself. As Popper pointed out, history has neither meaning nor value in itself (*Open Society* II: 256). Value can nonetheless be constructed from the raw material of history. Stevens asserted in his lecture "Imagination as Value" (1948) that the constructing mind "is the source not of a single value but of as many values as reside in the possibilities of things" (*NA* 136).

If Stevens' World War I poems qualify as determinist in their surrender to force and fate, those written during World War II challenge both determinist and historicist conceptions of history. Had their composition been imposed on him as a duty, he would doubtless have resisted it as another of those pressures of the contemporary world that he catalogues in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" (1941; *NA* 27–28). He embraced the challenge because it accorded with his belief, expressed in the poem "Of

Modern Poetry" (1940), that the modern poet maintains an interior dialogue with the men and women of his time.

As the product of such dialogue, modern poetry is inescapably political. But for Stevens the outcome of the dialogue was not a political program or ideology. Instead, he researched contemporary history for its latent possibilities. During World War II he was preoccupied with the possibility that he called the supreme fiction. "Asides on the Oboe" (1940) opens with his familiar ultimatum:

The prologues are over. It is a question, now,
Of final belief. So, say that final belief
Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose. (CP 250)

The poem goes on to locate the origin of a supreme fiction in the deaths of soldiers who, as historical phenomena, give rise to a constructed hero, an "impossible possible philosopher's man." Insofar as the rest of us partake in the hero's construction, he becomes the "central good"—a moral rather than a political good—to be found in the midst of war's "central evil."

One of Stevens' better-known treatments of the soldier, the epilogue to "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" (1942), is also his least typical. Because the soldier in the epilogue is still alive, the speaker cannot relate to him as elegist. The speaker's tone is also a bit uncertain. Though he addresses the soldier as "Monsieur and comrade" (CP 407), placing his possibly French counterpart on an equal footing, he is by turns adversarial and patronizing. He is anxious—this is a poem of unmistakable anxiety—to assert that writing poetry is the moral equivalent of fighting a war. Though he declares the mutual dependence of the two forms of warfare, he dwells exclusively on what the poet has to offer the soldier. For the other side of the equation we need to recall the "major man" cantos of "Notes" and other poems of this period that derive the idea of the hero, and ultimately the supreme fiction, from the historical deeds of soldiers.

Stevens was at first determined to underscore the political relevance of his moral speculation and had the opening and closing lines of the epilogue ("Soldier, there is a war . . .") stamped on the back cover of the limited first edition of *Notes*. Later, apparently uncomfortable with anything like op-ed poetry, he expressed misgivings about this decision (L 442). Shortly thereafter, he wrote a letter to Samuel French Morse, a poet—later, Stevens' first biographer—who was then in the army. "The lot of the soldier," he told Morse, apparently referring to military life in general rather than combat in particular, "is one of the great experiences, and I hope that you are happy to be having it: a chance to step out of the life that is more or less nothing much, and to look over the whole thing and to think about it as part of it" (L 450). In this classic instance of projection, Stevens refashions the soldier in his own image as the thinker who is simultaneously in history and out of it, at once engaged and detached.

For Stevens, warfare and soldiering were always as much a state of mind as they were a political reality, and this affects the way we read the soldier poems. First we must deal with their lack of specificity. In a few cases we know the nationality of the soldiers: they are English in "Phases," French in "Lettres," and Dutch in "Dutch Graves in Bucks County" (1943). But whom are they fighting, and for what cause? Where is the battle taking place, and when? If the soldiers are dead, as is usually the case, how did they die? We seek in vain for answers to these questions because, for Stevens, war was not simply politics by other means.

Poems written in response to specific historical events are among the least specific. Without the prompting of critical commentary, how many readers recognize the Spanish antifascists in "The Men That Are Falling" (1936)? How many think of Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia when they read the farcical account of a battle between angels and bushmen in "The Greenest Continent" (1936)? Politically oriented historical criticism is frustrated by the abstraction and elisions in such poems, which make them harder to place in an ideological spectrum. Unsympathetic critics typically respond by deploring the gaps, sympathetic critics by trying to fill them in.

I propose that we take a more productive tack: assuming that Stevens knew what he was up to, we might respect his omissions, assess their significance, and consider how they redirect our quest from politics to other kinds of historical meaning. The soldier poems invite us to reflect on those occasions when ordinary men do extraordinary things, when they behave in ways that are better than we have any reason to expect. The poems omit not only politics but also the darker side of human nature. We must look elsewhere in twentieth-century literature for examples of soldiers who behave badly.

Combatants all but disappear from Stevens' poetry after 1945, perhaps because they had all but disappeared from the front page of the newspaper. The speaker of "As You Leave the Room" (1947-55?) cites a poem about the "credible hero," probably "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War," as evidence that he has not lived "a skeleton's life, / As a disbeliever in reality" (OP 117). In contrast, another late poem, "The Course of a Particular" (1951), reminds us of the fine line that separates the credible from the incredible when it dismisses "the smoke-drift of puffed-out heroes" (OP 123). Among Stevens' last poems is "A Clear Day and No Memories" (1955), which opens with the line "No soldiers in the scenery" and goes on to describe the air that "flows over us without meanings" (OP 138-39).

Here, as so often in the later poetry, possibility seems to give way to "mere being." Significantly, however, Stevens never reverted to the closed history of his early work. The second note toward a supreme fiction, "It Must Change," could serve as rubric for most of the poems in *The Auroras of Autumn* (1948) and *The Rock* (1954). In the process of revising the su-

preme fiction, these poems reinvent history itself from the dialogue between human consciousness and material contingency.

So what will we talk about in the years to come, when we talk about Stevens and history? About politics, certainly. But also, I hope, about other kinds of historical possibility that he explored in his poetry, including the moral, aesthetic, and spiritual. To be sure, his poems about nobility and the hero resonate with few of today's readers. They must have seemed eccentric even in the 1940s. Readers who dismiss them as incredible or irrelevant, as Stevens himself did on occasion, may nonetheless affirm their open sense of history. Politics, we are told, is the art of the possible—a reminder that we are not to expect too much from its programs. For Stevens, poetry is likewise the art of the possible, but in an entirely different and more spacious sense. Fifty years after the publication of his *Collected Poems*, we have barely begun to explore that space.

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Notes

¹ See Walsh's *Concordance* for soldier poems that use the word "soldier(s)." Other poems that mention combatants include (in the *Collected Poems*) "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" IX, "Metaphors of a Magnifico," "The Revolutionists Stop for Orangeade," "The Men That are Falling," "Martial Cadenza," "Asides on the Oboe," "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas" II and VIII, "Flyer's Fall," "Extraordinary References," and (in *Opus Posthumous*) "The Greenest Continent" V, "Life on a Battleship," and "Stanzas for 'Examination of the Hero in a Time of War.'" "

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What's Historical About Historicism?

ALAN FILREIS

I

TO PREPARE FOR THIS panel I took advantage of the work undertaken by John N. Serio, longtime editor of *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, who in 2002 assembled the complete *First Twenty-Five Years* of the journal on CD in globally searchable Acrobat Reader format. Reading passages and pages, reviews and essays around all instances of the thrown-about term "historicism" from 1977 to 2002, and the phrase "historical scholarship," and even an ample selection of instances of the word "historical," I taught myself afresh the recent phases we have lived through: from iconographic "old" historicist notes (such as Roy Harvey Pearce's claim to have documented *the jar* in Tennessee—the "Dominion Wide Mouth Special" [65] used in moonshining) to Lisa Steinman's "Re-figuring Stevens: The Poet's Politics" (a foray, itself unhistoricized, into Stevens' apparent nonresponse to the most politicized era of his life, the 1930s), to the ardent bio-historical readings of the mid- to late 1990s.

Back in 1992, Steinman contended that certain critics of Stevens—those who say he "ignores historical specificity" (53)—were actually expressing their own generalized longing, in Melita Schaum's words, for a "'pure, unmediated presentation of . . . the 'actual' world'" (qtd. in Steinman 54). In order to assess those who thus judge Stevens apolitical on these grounds, "we need some way of saying why *all* literature is not subject to the same criticism" (54). Or, to assert this standard a little more restrictively, rendering it more practical as a critical project: we need some way of distinguishing from other writing how Stevens' in particular does or does not resist the apparently natural tendency of literary language toward historical unspecificity. This kind of thinking about Stevens' politics is compelling, not as historical criticism but as an instance of meta-historicism applied to the *instance* of Stevens. Steinman made an assumption, plausible then but less plausible now, that historical readings of Stevens' poems themselves (not discussions of historicism but the readings themselves) are deemed arguable on their own terms (as readings good and bad, inept or capable, persuasive and unpersuasive), rather than as representatives of a whole methodology that is *itself* to be hailed or decried because of what Stevens' poetry inherently is. The former are readings, the latter functionalist explanations.

More than a decade ago, then, it seemed necessary to assume that historical approaches to Stevens doubtless led to the conclusion that Stevens was apolitical, not that they might lead contrarily to the conclusion of his connectedness, engagement, or involvement. Prior to the point in her essay to which I have just referred, Steinman had cited Cary Nelson, a frankly leftist critic (who had recently published his polemical book *Repression and Recovery*); she had quoted the former communist poet-editor Stanley Burnshaw. Apparently, then, she meant critics of Stevens' apparent apoliticism or detachment from the left; historical criticism would entail reading from the left of Burnshaw/Nelson to the right of Stevens. The method would seem to be a form of radicalism itself, which in turn becomes a tool for disclosing Stevens' detachment. I aver that it was generally true of the critical moment: to do historically contextual readings of Stevens would only reinforce conclusions already drawn about his "politics" by those who engaged him by means of other methods, an interpretive enterprise launched in the 1950s, a time of special academic conservatism masked as apoliticism. (As you will see, I am equally concerned about the reversal of the trend: the assumption that to historicize Stevens is to find him enabling a "revolutionary" poetic context.)

II

I have been struck by the title of this panel. It has included the phrase "pro and con" and yet the three of us (Bates, Longenbach, Filreis) are known for our historical readings. *Where's the con?* Perhaps we are being implicitly invited to recant. Indeed there are days when recantation seems the only apt response to historical readings of Stevens' poems. Although there are poems, not just apparent lyric failures such as "Owl's Clover," but also lovely and rewardingly difficult poems such as "Description without Place," that I would contend are unreadable by any other critical means. There are also poems, of course, such as "Earthy Anecdote"—

Every time the bucks went clattering
Over Oklahoma
A firecat bristled in the way.

Wherever they went,
They went clattering. . . . (CP 3)

—in which a playful emphasis on the turning of phrases and the rhetorical caprice of geopolitical reference make a poetic thing so fleeting that the weight of typical historical analysis, really of related cultural history, bears down heavily on the lines in such a way as to make us repress the poem's lightness, to forget the apparitional quality of the word "Oklahoma" (an irony, to be sure)—and, really, how basically antic the poem is, how (in that sense) "earthy" of Stevens to have written it. As Eleanor Cook

reminds us, we have not done enough to test place-names sufficiently as poetry. Referentiality is, among other things, a poetics.

I recently read an unpublished essay on nationhood and locality in "Earthy Anecdote." Overall it was a very good piece. The author, John Andrew Miller, who has graciously permitted me to refer to his essay, seeks "to complicate our sense of Stevens' imaginative relation not only to the American nation-state but also to the vexed legacy of the American nineteenth century: the century," Miller goes on to say, "in which Stevens was initiated into the rituals of American nationhood." This seems a tenable assertion. Yet because (perhaps for lack of space) no argument is made to suggest information or context more specific—what we learn here we already knew, namely that Wallace Stevens came of age in the nineteenth century—the evidentiary standard runs along these lines: a person who comes of age in a century in a nation is a person of that century and of that nation, such that one can take ideas of nationhood then generally developed in that century and apply them to a single reference that person makes three decades later to a territory of that earlier time. Later Miller refers to "the concept of the frontier in the dominant discourses of the 1880s," and, to keep the connection going, reminds us, in a grammatically set-off clause, that this was "the moment at which Stevens was beginning to negotiate the world around him." This is cultural history by subordination. X, who lived in a time of Y, can be said to convey a sense of Y, such that Y is a quality of that time and X's poem is otherwise not easily readable in relation to Y.

To be sure, I finally agree with Miller that "Earthy Anecdote" discloses something about nineteenth-century notions of American territoriality. Yet the context-setting interpreter of Stevens' poetry is always at risk of creating an irony of over-reading, which is to say he risks ignoring the mode of Stevens' rhetoric in particular, else the already skeptical reader of the poem, itself already ironic in tenor, will return to the poem now as a David undoing Goliathan attempts to render it.

I have already been unfair to what is generally a reasonable argument. I want to move on to fairer game, but first I must describe the perhaps jocular assertion that in the first place instigated my thinking about the fate of historicism, the situation of Stevens criticism, and "Earthy Anecdote." This was the matter of the historical relevance of the decline of the Oklahoma deer population at the time Stevens wrote the poem. I did not mind reading about this (I found the fact fascinating), but what concerned me was that this was said to be a point that Helen Vendler, in her own reading of the poem, had "failed to explore."

III

The flip side of faux accuracy is of course inaccuracy, a special vulnerability when the critic is claiming something about (as the phrase goes) "Stevens and history." Or, as in Sarah Riggs's case, geopolitics and tech-

nology. In such phrases, the conjunction protests too much. In Riggs's reading of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," in *Word Sightings: Poetry and Visual Media in Stevens, Bishop, and O'Hara*, Riggs depends on the assumption that Stevens felt "at home in New Haven, home-sick for the sensation of the absence within home-places." As we know from Stevens' letters (especially if one reads them narratively) and from Peter Brazeau's work, among others', Stevens was not "at home in New Haven" (Riggs 12). New Haven and Hartford were as different as Geneva is from Oxidia, as the Mystic Garden from the Middling Beast, Harold Bloom from Mrs. Pappadopoulos, Professor Eucalyptus from the green sprout Why. Did Riggs forget, in the course of writing, that Stevens did not reside in New Haven, or that it is an unsettlingly great academic distance from one to the other—that New Haven is always an elsewhere for him? In any case, the confusion undermines her claim that in the poem "he does not arrive in New Haven" and makes ironic her assertion that in the poem "The feeling of something lacking circulates within language, and its referential reach toward places . . . conveys rather than fills the lack" (12).

In *The Violence Within/The Violence Without: Wallace Stevens and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Poetics*, Jacqueline Brogan presents a lengthy argument for Stevens' engagement with the Second World War. The overall thesis is specifically historical; the readings of poems are often more generally historicized. Brogan reads the poem "The News and the Weather" as expressing "an elliptically stated alignment . . . between mass production and mass responsiveness to the swaggering manner of militaristic . . . pomposity" (39). But in the poem the sun crosses a picket-line. He works at *their* jobs. "He caught the flags and the picket-lines / Of people, round the auto-works. . . . He milled / . . . He drilled" (CP 264). Any persuasive historical reading of the poem must somehow account for the rhetorical presence of Labor there—to Labor's critical response to armaments speed-up, a reaction that to some seemed unpatriotic.

To dub this a poem of 1941 helps only a little. Like 1917, 1939, 1968, 1989, and 2001, 1941 was a very long year. It is true that prior to Pearl Harbor, throwing pickets up around a plant seemed a reasonable strategy for resisting employers' using the excuse of war to roll back gains made by workers in the thirties. But there must be more. Perhaps the greatest single shift in the war occurred that June, when the Nazis broke the Nazi-Soviet pact and the Soviets joined the Allies, thus for American radicals, including many unionists, suddenly eliminating any hesitation about the alliance; most on the communist-affiliated left shifted overnight from supporting strikes to officially opposing them in favor of the war effort. Which crucially different era is the one from which the poem's strike-busting sun arises? The poem was published in the Summer 1941 issue of *Accent* and might be said, as Brogan generally puts it, to "signal[] a . . . profound disgust with . . . propagandistic rhetoric" (39). But Stevens mailed the poem to Kerker Quinn, the editor of *Accent*, on April 21, 1941. What happened

in June 1941, the moment straddling the writing and submission on one hand and the publication of this poem on the other, is not a nicety of military or diplomatic history, to be left to others in the historical disciplines; it is arguably the event of the entire war that altered intellectuals' positions more than any other. "He caught the flags and the picket-lines" signified one thing in April and quite another in the summer. We need to drill down, with the sun of that day, a little further.

Brogan's case that "what is most striking about Stevens' poetry during this period is the degree to which it does actually begin to 'think about war,' " depends largely on the unelaborated factual assertion that not just Stevens' *age* but also his *occupation* made him otherwise normally "far removed from actual war" (31). Yet his work with surety bonds put him in contact with frenzied post- and *pre*-Pearl Harbor armaments and the process of military-industrial contract bidding in a way that might support the opposite claim: it is not so striking that Stevens of all people would quickly learn how to think about war.

In her preface Brogan explains why she only very sparingly used "my own contextual evidence" and chose to depend, rather, on "the archival and contextual research already done so well by James Longenbach and Alan Filreis" (7). In other words, her historical conclusions were to be built upon this work. Yet her general contention that Stevens emerges from the Second World War with politically radical views (including an anti-war position!) and his immediate postwar poems augur the emergence of a revolutionary poetics methodologically necessitates a new or different set of historical material, or at least a detailed reassessment and reinterpretation of the primary material. Depending on the earlier historical analyses, less its experience of the method, risks the sort of complex historical forgetting that Brogan's major gesture as a scholar-critic aptly sought to avoid.

IV

In *Modernism from Right to Left*, my book on Stevens and radicalism in the 1930s, I did not contend that Stevens was a radical. Nor, to be sure, was I making such a point in the Cold-War chapters of *Stevens and the Actual World*, which covered 1939 to 1955. On the contrary, for instance, the very resistance to referentiality in "Description without Place" (1945) in my view befits the end-of-ideological moment immediately after the war. It is a poem engaged with the moment's style of disengagement (Filreis 1991: 151–86).

My reading of *The Man with the Blue Guitar* (Filreis 1994: 248–90), a poem whose idea of ideological language I greatly admire, was that Stevens was learning from modernism how to engage the major rhetorical back-and-forthing of his time, the political argument between and among various lefts and rights, lefts and rights that were concurrently in motion on the topic of art. The dynamism of the poem enacts the discussion formally as it was. It evinces Stevens as a writer in the mix, articulates by way of seem-

ing improvisation the engaging picture of art he wished to draw, and testifies in its structure that his modernism was not as solitudinous as the reductive view ascribed by the right to the left would have it—the left that allegedly despised Stevens.

Warren French's simplistic, uninformed view in a book called *The Thirties* (1967) was that the Red Decade was an era in which "[t]he times conspired against the lyricist unless like [Wallace] Stevens he chose to sing largely unheard" (121). On this crucial question—*Did the radical era bring on the demise of lyricism and was Stevens, for example, unheard on the left that allegedly killed the lyric?*—people such as French were wrong, I have learned, on several counts. I came by this knowledge through the methods of the cultural historian, methods I have valued primarily for that reason—which is to say, with them I could read Stevens' poems as poems but I also read the poems of almost every radical poet of that time and searched for private correspondence among radical poets in which *their* reading (and appreciation) of Stevens is revealed. Most of this material, including many of their poems, was unavailable then except in archives. It made little sense to write about historical concepts as large as nationhood in a century as large as the nineteenth. Rather the frame was tighter. What line or what lexical borrowing from the moment's discourse in *Ideas of Order* was that to which the now-forgotten bisexual communist poet Willard Maas responded in mid-1935, just at the rise of the Popular Front strategy of ideological and aesthetic inclusiveness (Filreis 1994: 126–27)? It is a fact that Stevens' *Ideas of Order* and *Owl's Clover*—books of poems that straddled the moment of that inclusion—were loudly and clearly heard on the literary left, and that fact, I think, in turn inspired the variational rhetoric of *The Man with the Blue Guitar* in 1936–37. To the extent that the latter contention is true, the work of the historicist critic *is* saying something about the poem as a poem.

When Stanley Burnshaw (who was himself a lyric poet seeking to write for eternity above all else) in the late fifties and early sixties tried to undo the literary-political confusions generated by his affiliation with the communist *New Masses*, he discovered that even otherwise keen poetry critics were ignorant of the political history that had crucially affected aesthetic responses (Filreis and Teres)—and that they had not even bothered to read his *New Masses* essays—or literally could not find them, since some libraries' shelves had by then been cleared of communist material. Although he did not believe he was being red-baited by poetry critics who merely named his name (as if the name "Burnshaw" alone could for Stevens critics stand in for all communist poetry critique), it did trouble him that he had to begin again in his explanations. History had been forgotten. He became a literary historiographer by default, although his own predilection was to be New Critical. The gesture of Burnshaw's starting over with the historical context for Marxist literary historicism, despite what he took to be his best interests as a poet-critic, was itself fundamentally a historicist one—the method required of him at that moment.

So I would contend it was required of us later. Perhaps that moment, in its turn, has passed. After all, now our first best reader of Stevensian rhetoric can be said to have “failed to explore” the fact of the decline of the Oklahoma deer population in 1917. For me personally the response to this situation is not to recant, to eschew a method now that standards have been raised, but to explore the literary-historical context the poem makes and in which it partakes even more assiduously.

Locating Burnshaw was never more than a start. It is not sufficient to use one or two contemporaneous alternatives to Stevens, putting them in what might be called a representative dialectic in the context of the poems, in order to make the case for Stevens’ relevance to the social practices of his day. Ponder what might be the literary historian’s counter-response to the Cold War–era contention of Murray Kempton that political writers in the 1930s “were all very conventional” and “devoid of education” (178–79)—or Diana Trilling’s that the thirties was “a time of generally weak intellection,” as she acidly put it in 1959 (220). Our response cannot be merely to note, having sought some representative bit of literary history, that one communist modernist, let us say the aforementioned Willard Maas, *when a communist*, was thrilled that his own poems were being likened to Stevens’.

To discover Stevens’ poems in contemporary circulation never for me risks losing sight of his value. On the contrary, the more capacious the context the greater the recognition of such value. I would rather have my readers rediscover the Stevens they think they know in something approximating a contemporaneous gesture of recognition—however much that project risks seeming to skeptics like a fantasy of pure, unmediated presentation of the actual world.

It cannot be merely that Stevens from a modernist position read the *New Masses*, admired the poems of Maas and those of Ruth Lechlitner, and probably knew that his publisher was a member of the Communist Party (Filreis 1994: 122–28). But, moreover, crucially, from the other side of the supposed modernist-communist divide, Isidor Schneider deeply admired Henry James and was willing to say so in the communist papers (Schneider 1945: 23). Joseph Freeman revered the work of Piet Mondrian. Communists wrote pure nature poems (Filreis 1994: 195, 346 n 94) and lacy imagist ditties (cf. Schneider’s “Dawn”; see Filreis 1994: 112), had conducted what they called “elfin experiments” in verse (Untermeyer 336), and had sometimes quoted what they unironically called passages from “‘revolutionary poems which are plainly precious’ ” (qtd. in Filreis 1994: 6), had loved and imitated “the orotund, rolling prose of Sir Thomas Browne” (Conroy 49), and had praised “the little lyricists . . . who are finding a place in the memories of people who can and do, upon occasion, quote the great poets of the past” (Schneider 1932, 1:16). That Maas, as a communist who later consorted with Fluxus artists and made underground poem-films, felt joy at the news that his poems, “whether . . . of love or revolution,” were “sug-

gestive of Wallace Stevens' serenity" (Filreis 1994: 126); *yes but also* that the doctrinaire H. H. Lewis, author of *Thinking of Russia* (1932), proudly won the Harriet Monroe Lyric Prize (Dillon; Wixson 455); that Lechlitner at the height of Edna St. Vincent Millay's association with the Popular Front criticized Millay's *Conversation at Midnight* (1937) as verse that was *insufficiently poetic*; that Walter Lowenfels, by calling Kenneth Fearing "one of the *avant garde* poets," meant the highest sort of praise (Lowenfels 1957, 52); that Eda Lou Walton, a CPUSA member for decades, rapturously elegized W. B. Yeats (Walton 19); that Frank Marshall Davis, the African-American poet who later joined the CPUSA, learned both modernism and communism at Kansas State College and did not until much later see them as exclusive in the least (Davis xxvi–xxvii); that Alfred Kreymborg, although a "red-hot" communist (Filreis 1994: 189, 194–98, 229), continued to depend on his "old friend Tom Eliot" for help getting published without feeling sly about it or ideologically contradictory (Kreymborg); that Walter Snow, co-editor of *The Anvil*, regular contributor to *The Rebel Poet*, and union organizer for the Newspaper Guild, maintained a "passion" for "the early Pound" (Singleton xiii)—these facts escaped Murray Kempton's normally keen attention precisely because as Kempton gathered material and testimonies for his book of the mid-fifties, *Part of Our Time*, his informed sources were *not* Lechlitner, still heretical and literarily underground; nor Walton, who was almost hounded out of her teaching job by red-hunters attacking NYU; nor Lowenfels, who was in jail for conspiring to overthrow the U.S. government; nor Davis, who was in Hawaii selling printing supplies and whose value as a poet would not be rediscovered until 1973; nor even Stanley Burnshaw—but, rather (almost certainly), his source was the volubly, aggressively disillusioned James T. Farrell, a writer with a poor sense of the modern poetry scene.

It matters who the sources of our sources were—and who they were not. It tells us *how* we came to our admire Stevens' writing of that time. That admiration (which is to say the history of our admiration) is never without such context. In the end, we might or might not delight in the conclusion that all those other poets are the bucks, and he—Stevens—the firecat. But, surely, one has to know how to listen for all that clattering.

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Wallace Stevens and Figurative Language: Pro and Con

JAMES LONGENBACH

IMAGINE A PANEL called "Wallace Stevens and Figurative Language: Pro and Con." Professor X steps to the podium to extol the virtues of the most Spenserian moments in Stevens—the flights of metaphor embellished with outlandish sound effects, the little fables that spill into grander allegories of death and sleep. Professor X is aware that this is not everyone's favorite side of Stevens, though the function of the frivolous is more apparent today than in the days when a more sternly apocalyptic notion of modernism held sway. But he appeals to Nietzsche, who suggested that when confronted by what has been revealed, a great artist averts his eyes to what remains covered. "How, then, is metaphor degeneration," says Professor X, quoting the poem of that title, "When Swatara becomes this undulant river / And the river becomes the landless, waterless ocean?" (CP 444).

There is applause; Professor X collects his papers and sits down as professor Y rises to the podium. Stevens really wants to know when metaphor is degeneration, argues Professor Y, who goes on to examine those moments in which Stevens registers a discomfort with the very figurative language he employs. He concedes that Stevens does not everywhere evince this discomfort, which is why some people have been able to read his poetry as a monologically sealed-off utterance, a world of words to the end of it. But such readers are less skeptical than Stevens himself, says Professor Y, pointing his audience to "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas," where Stevens distances himself from the poet who wants to look away from what has been revealed. Who could admire a poet, says Stevens, who equates "ten thousand deaths / With a single well-tempered apricot, or, say, / An egg-plant of good air" (CP 253)?

More applause. Professor Y sits down as Professor Z walks to the podium. Professor Z begins this way: "Imagine a panel called 'Wallace Stevens and History: Pro and Con.'" Gesturing to Professor X, he emphasizes again that for many years Stevens was known as a poet of figurative delights, a poet who seemed unconcerned with human suffering, a poet whose reputation as an aesthete was unwittingly solidified by critical methodologies whose strength depended upon a strategic disregard for the referential capacities of language. Gesturing to Professor Y, Professor Z emphasizes

again that Stevens was also a poet who was at times deeply troubled by such disregard. He recalls Stevens' well-known response to the intellectual and political climate of the 1930s, his attempt to address that climate in the long poem "Owl's Clover," and his subsequent sense of that poem's failure. He invokes the well-known poems in which Stevens responds, in ways that seemed to him more successful, to the Second World War.

But such moments in Stevens' career are misleading, Professor Z continues, if we imagine that Stevens could possibly have chosen between embracing figurative language and rejecting figurative language. Words by their nature will conjure other words; words by their nature will refer to things. The great strength of Stevens as a poet is that he could not take sides, however elucidating it may be for us to cast a complicated dilemma in the form of a more easily apprehendable opposition. To celebrate or opine the work of figurative language in poetry, says Professor Z, would be as peculiar as celebrating or opining the presence of history in poetry.

Begging his audience to indulge a digression, Professor Z considers a poet who has both celebrated the presence of history in her poetry and opined the lack of history in her poetry. In the foreword to her *Collected Early Poems*, Adrienne Rich chastises the young poet who wrote "Storm Warnings," the first poem in her first book: "Nothing in the scene of this poem suggests that it was written in the early days of the Cold War, within a twenty year old's earshot of World War II, at the end of the decade of the Warsaw Ghetto and Auschwitz, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in a climate of public fatalism about World War III" (xix-xx).

But it is not exactly true to say that nothing in the poem "suggests" the impingement of these historical events on the private act of writing. What Rich means is that instead of naming events directly, the language of "Storm Warnings" creates an aura of associations. For while none of the twentieth century's cataclysms are named in the poem, the poem does register an awareness of these events through its figurative language.

I draw the curtains as the sky goes black
And set a match to candles sheathed in glass
Against the keyhole draught, the insistent whine
Of weather through the unsealed aperture.
This is our sole defense against the season;
These are the things that we have learned to do
Who live in troubled regions. (3)

The poet who published these lines in 1951 was probably sure that her readers would understand this "troubled region[]" as an eerily calm post-war world, a world in which the sky still looks black. W. H. Auden was able to speak confidently of "the historical apprehension expressed in 'Storm Warnings'" (10). But for the later Rich, the figurative and referential capacities of language cannot intersect. Her sense of the deficiencies

of "Storm Warnings" culminates in a list of events, as if history could exist in a poem independent of the language recording it.

This anxiety about figurative language has a long and venerable pedigree in American poetry, suggests Professor Z. Recall the little poem by William Carlos Williams called "El Hombre."

It's a strange courage
you give me, ancient star:

Shine alone in the sunrise
toward which you lend no part! (76)

Williams praises an object for standing alone, for being nothing but itself, and he wants to foster the impression that his words work in the same way, denoting only their objects and rejecting any extraneous associations.

Recall Stevens' "Nuances of a Theme by Williams," which begins by quoting Williams' poem. Stevens goes on to offer two variations on it.

I

Shine alone, shine nakedly, shine like bronze,
that reflects neither my face nor any inner part
of my being, shine like fire, that mirrors nothing.

II

Lend no part to any humanity that suffuses
you in its own light.
Be not chimera of morning,
Half-man, half-star.
Be not an intelligence,
Like a widow's bird
Or an old horse. (CP 18)

Stevens' fanciness may seem at odds with Williams' plainness, but in fact Stevens is playing out the implications of Williams' poem, not turning against it. "Shine alone in the sunrise," says Williams to the morning star, making it stand paradoxically for something other than itself: it becomes a figure for the poem's aesthetic. "Shine alone," repeats Stevens. "Shine nakedly," he continues, emphasizing the morning star's singularity but also extending its figurative power: it is not only like a poem but like a human body. "Shine like bronze / that reflects neither my face nor any inner part / of my being," he adds, continuing to describe the morning star's independence in language that cannot help but to remind us of its place in the chain of metaphorical correspondences. By the end of the poem ("Be not an intelligence, / Like a widow's bird / Or an old horse"), the poem has pushed this paradox to the point of hilarity. We have forgot-

ten utterly the object—the morning star—that the poem wanted to impress upon our memories. But the playfulness of these lines feels serious; they suggest that we have no choice but to employ figurative language in the act of recording the world around us.

Anxiety about a poem's relationship to history, says Professor Z, is the same thing as anxiety about figurative language. Or, to put it more bluntly, it is anxiety about poetry itself. When Wordsworth revisited it in 1798, Tintern Abbey was a refuge for homeless beggars and the wretchedly poor; the landscape around it was scarred by the early excesses of the industrial revolution. Only a little of that historical evidence appears in Wordsworth's poem, but that evidence, combined with the fact that the poem's title skirts the anniversary of Bastille Day ("Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey, on revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798"), persuades the literary critic Marjorie Levinson to conclude that "what we witness in this poem is a conversion of public to private property, history to poetry" (37). But what else, asks Professor Z, could we possibly witness in poetry? What do we want if we want a poem to be more like history? What do we want if we want a poem to be less like history?

These, says Professor Z, are questions that Stevens poses to himself. The final canto of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" concludes with a vision of a perfectly turned world—"my green, my fluent mundo"; but then a coda intrudes by reminding us that this poem of high imagination is located in a time of war.

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. (CP 407)

For the poet, the war is a metaphor; for the soldier it is not. The poet's war "between the mind / And sky" takes place "in his room," and if this war meets the soldier's war it is only in "a book in a barrack, a letter from Malay"—only, that is, in the brief moments when the intimacy afforded by language intersects with a war that is, as Stevens said elsewhere, em-

phasizing the limitations of poetry in a time of social crisis, “a military state of affairs, not a literary one” (*OP* 310).

Still, many readers have found the coda to “Notes” jarring or dissatisfying—as if Wordsworth had appended lines to “Tintern Abbey” in which he admitted that he felt miserably unsure of what shape social responsibility should take in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Some readers ignore the coda because they want to question the poem’s apparent suppression of its historical location; others ignore the coda because they want to celebrate the poem’s apparent transcendence of its location. But if Stevens suggests implicitly throughout “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” that no one really wants to face a world at war, the epilogue suddenly reminds us that we must face it. The language we employ to evade the world inevitably becomes the language we employ to confront it.

The whole of “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” dramatizes this tension. Having rejected the repetition of the seasons as “granite monotony,” the poem comes round to embrace the simply dailiness of repetition as “an occupation, an exercise, a work, / A thing final in itself and therefore good” (*CP* 405). Having celebrated the capacity of words to fly free of their referents, the poem wonders if poetry is “an evasion, a thing not apprehended or / Not apprehended well.” “Does the poet / Evade us?” (*CP* 396) asks Stevens, sounding like a skeptical reader of his own poem. Then, sounding more like his friend Williams, Stevens wonders about the consequences of naming a thing flatly: since things change, evade themselves, he asks if checking these evasions would mean implying that language exists outside the human experience of time.

Civil, madam, I am, but underneath
A tree, this unprovoked sensation requires

That I should name you flatly, waste no words,
Check your evasions, hold you to yourself.
Even so when I think of you as strong or tired,

Bent over work, anxious, content, alone,
You remain the more than natural figure. You
Become the soft-footed phantom, the irrational

Distortion, however fragrant, however dear. (*CP* 406)

The figure, these lines from the final canto of “Notes” suggest, always remains more or other than itself, no matter how intimate our relationship to it may be. But if these lines justify an evasive poetry in the face of an endlessly evasive world, the poem’s coda insists this justification of endless resistance must itself be resisted: “Soldier, there is a war. . . .” If we evade these lines in turn, we do so because we feel their challenge—their

recognition of the intricate ways in which evasion is complicit with confrontation, omission with inclusion, history with figurative language.

Building on Levinson's essay on "Tintern Abbey," the literary critic Jerome McGann once described the poem's "displacement" of social conditions, then its "erasure[]," and finally its "annihilat[ion]" of those conditions: "the poem annihilates its history," says McGann (84, 85, 90). This argument equates a metaphor's act of displacement with omission; however, Freud is adamant in *The Interpretation of Dreams* that displacement is the opposite of omission: it is the means by which repression is subverted, allowing forbidden thoughts to be admitted into a dream. Like Adrienne Rich, McGann suggests that because figurative language has a complex relationship to what it represents, there must be something better than language—a more reliable way of ensuring that history is contained in the poem.

There is not anything better, concludes Professor Z, nor is there anything worse. Does a metaphor repress the thing to which it refers or is it the means by which repression is subverted, allowing the unmentionable thing to enter the poem? "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" is troubled by this question, but it does not entertain the notion that a poem could make the question go away by ceasing to employ figurative language; the poem lives in the question. Nor does the poem congratulate itself for employing figurative language subversively, smuggling the repressed into poetry. Poems may sometimes encourage us to think this way, but poems also make us question this way of questioning: to rest comfortably on a poem's discomfort with itself is to evade an anxiety that Stevens cannot help but amplify because the language of poetry amplifies it.

Professor Z has finished. More applause. As he turns from the podium, he wonders if he should have explained his stake in what he has said. Some years ago, Professor Z wrote a book about Stevens and figurative language that happened to appear at a time when the study of figurative language seemed especially provocative in American English departments. Similar books appeared at around the same time. This moment offered a useful correction to critical tastes it superseded, but the moment almost instantly generated its own excesses. What Professor Z regrets, in retrospect, is that Stevens' place in the little drama of critical taste inevitably became confused with Stevens' place in the grand, ongoing drama of poetry. Would anyone need to ask whether the study of figurative language in Milton or Blake was a good thing or a bad thing? Could anyone be for or against the place of history in his or her poetry?

By the time he had articulated these questions to himself, Professor Z had taken his chair, grateful to turn the podium back to his colleagues.

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Prologues to Stevens Criticism in Fifty Years

JOHN N. SERIO

PROLOGUE TO THE PRESENT

WHEN I FIRST BEGAN thinking about this topic, I took quite a conservative view. As editor of *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, I even thought about titling my talk "A View from the Dump," a phrase I borrow from Wallace Stevens in its most positive sense: out of the numerous submissions we receive (and my educated guess is that we have reviewed well over 1,000 manuscripts), occasionally a fresh, intelligent, original response to Stevens emerges. But most of what we receive, with such titles as "Wallace Stevens: Who Are You Anyway?" "A Close Reading of 'Farewell to Florida' with Special Attention to Irony and Tone," or "Poetry as an Antidote to Information Saturation," remain heartfelt but not ground-breaking responses to Stevens and so do not warrant publication. In one humorous incident, I actually wrote the author to inquire, "Are you serious, or is this a parody of scholarship?" Had the individual agreed on the latter, the essay had real potential. Unfortunately, the response I received was, "Yes, I am serious . . . [and] I stand by my submission."

Of the essays we have published (around 300), most have been in what might be termed traditional modes; that is, thematic or formalistic approaches that focus on illuminating meaning. A surprising number have been comparative studies, most of them on Stevens and other poets—the names of nearly forty different poets appear in titles alone, ranging from Catullus and Dante to Shelley and Keats to Bishop and Merrill to Ammons and Bronk. Many articles discuss the influences of and/or analogues with philosophers (Santayana, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, William James), painters (Duchamp, Klee, Cézanne, Picasso, and contemporaries such as Fairfield Porter, Jasper Johns, and David Hockney), musicians (Stravinsky, Wassily Kandinsky, Ives), and, most recently, even architects (Frank Lloyd Wright). Some are biographical and others bibliographical. This characteristic of Stevens criticism as being mostly traditional literary analysis has not changed in over twenty-five years, and I doubt it will in the next fifty. In fact, a quick overview of the topics for this conference reflects a similar tendency to discuss Stevens using traditional formal, comparative, and thematic approaches.

Imagine for a moment that today is fifty years in the past and that it is April 9, 1954 (close enough for our purposes to the official October 1, 1954, publication date of *Collected Poems*). What was the state of Stevens criticism at that time? Among the various articles and reviews published that year we find Marianne Moore and William Carlos Williams praising Stevens' musical harmonies; Conrad Aiken calling Stevens the "master magician of meaning" (16); Don Geiger identifying four techniques of ambiguity used to produce a complex range of significance; Bernard Heringman tracing the metamorphosis of "green" from representing reality to symbolizing the synthesis of reality and the imagination in order to illustrate how such symbols evoke the transcendence of Stevens' vision; and Randall Jarrell, in early 1955, observing that the process of creating the poem is the poem. Clearly, we are at the height of the New Criticism, the movement in literary criticism that dominated the scene from the 1930s well into the 1960s.

Who could have anticipated what was to occur about a decade later—a series of critical approaches, often emerging one out of the other or in reaction to the other, that shaped literary interpretation for the next twenty years and more? We are all familiar with the movements: structuralism, semiotics, post-structuralism, deconstruction, Marxism, reader response, postmodernism, feminism, new historicism, and more recently queer theory, deep ecology, post-colonialism, cultural studies—in short, theory. In Stevens criticism, we witnessed the conversion, if not reversal, of two of Stevens' most ardent explicators, Joseph N. Riddel and J. Hillis Miller, who abandoned their earlier phenomenological stances for deconstruction. Suddenly Stevens, the poet of transcendence, the poet who "For a moment" could evoke "the central of our being" (*CP* 380), was no more; the center evaporated. What these scholars emphasized is that Stevens himself raises the very questions that undermine any semblance of the stability of meaning. Stevens had discovered, in Miller's phrase, "the linguistic moment," the great watershed between subject and object, signifier and signified, language and reality. If the hallmark of theory is self-reflexivity—thinking about thinking—what better example than Wallace Stevens, whose poetry establishes questions as one of the categories: "Where was it one first heard of the truth?" asks Stevens. "The the" (*CP* 203). Although we as humans may desire to be at the center, we find ourselves inextricably and always "Helplessly at the edge" (*CP* 430).

These swift turns in critical approaches, coming from divergent fields such as anthropology, linguistics, philosophy, political theory, economics, and psychoanalysis, led to a plethora of energetic work on Stevens. As the new editor of the journal, I will never forget how hard I had to work during the 1980s just to keep up with the monumental number of submissions we received. Often it seemed that the articles were more about theory as the subject of study than about Stevens, who was merely the illustration.

In a number of instances, these new approaches culminated in special issues on topics such as Stevens and Postmodernism, Stevens and Women, and Stevens and Politics. Although the majority of essays we have published in the last twenty years have been along traditional lines, these news areas of discourse constitute a significant portion.

PROLOGUE TO THE FUTURE

Are we at the end of theory, a term for a miscellaneous genre that Jonathan Culler defines as designating “works that succeed in challenging and re-orienting thinking in fields other than those to which they apparently belong” (3)? Some recent developments might suggest as much, beginning at least for me with Frank Lentricchia’s unabashed confession in his 1996 “Last Will and Testament of an Ex-Literary Critic.” His “silent encounters with literature,” Lentricchia admits, have been “ravishingly pleasurable, like erotic transport” (59), and he now affirms—as a rhapsode, a literal enthusiast out of his mind—that literature is enjoyable and important “as literature, and not as an illustration of something else” (60). Just last year, *Critical Inquiry* convened “an intellectual town meeting” on the topic of whether theory is still pertinent, and Terry Eagleton—author of more than a dozen books expounding *The Significance of Theory*, as one of his titles phrases it—calls his latest book *After Theory*, in which he describes the demise or at least dead-end of theory. As David Kirby writes in a recent article in the *Christian Science Monitor*, “Postmodern literary theory is now transforming itself so rapidly that Marxist, feminist, deconstructionist, and psychoanalytic critics (and others) are flocking back to the drawing board in droves as they search for new approaches to writing and teaching” (11). Clearly, the pendulum has begun to swing back toward the middle, to what poets like Auden knew, that “poetry makes nothing happen” (197), and critics like Helen Vendler championed, that literature is art and should be appreciated and approached foremost in terms of its form.

What do my first two prologues—set in the present and in the past—suggest about the future? On the one hand, my experience as editor convinces me that not much will change in terms of the predominant direction of Stevens criticism in the future. It will remain traditional literary analysis, concentrating on meaning and style, evoking parallels with and influences on other poets, using various philosophers or other thinkers to elucidate the subtleties of significance in Stevens’ poetry of process. However, just as music with its scale of twelve notes contains an infinite number of melodies (it makes one think of “Thirteen Ways . . .”), so too will we continue to discover revitalizing and illuminating interpretations of Stevens. What will add to this, I believe, is the increase we will witness as people from divergent cultures begin to read and respond to his poetry, much of which by then will be in the public domain and readily available on the World Wide Web. The effect of the Web—which, frankly, is still in its initial stages—cannot be underestimated. Daily I am surprised by the

number of inquiries I receive about Stevens from all parts of the world—most recently Poland, India, Saudi Arabia, Japan, Korea, and, believe it or not, Iraq.

But my imagined experiment, in which I recalled the state of Stevens studies in 1954 and the astonishing explosion in methodologies that soon followed, had a liberating outcome. Just as the effects of the New Criticism have been irreversible, so too have the implications of theory: they have become inescapably a part of our approach to Stevens. Readers can no longer deny the theoretical and linguistic problems that Stevens himself poses. They will pay more attention to the nuances of phrasings, the give-and-take of affirmation and denial, the indissoluble tensions between appearance and reality, order and chaos, and thought and feeling that his poetry evokes.

Even more liberating for me (remember, I admitted I am practical) is the realization that if we could have experienced such a phenomenal revolution in literary criticism in the recent past, who is to say that it could not happen again? Eliot, I believe, once observed that poets must create their own audiences. Theory is the very fabric of Stevens' poetry and it will continue to inspire and generate theoretical responses. Just as structuralism emerged from anthropology and post-structuralism from various self-conscious analyses in philosophy, psychoanalysis, history, politics, and culture, who can say with certainty that new approaches will not emerge from unexpected fields? I have no idea, but I am open to it. I am like Stevens' persona in "Prologues to What Is Possible," "lured on by a syllable without any meaning," but believing "with an appointed sureness, / That it contained the meaning into which he wanted to enter" (CP 516).

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The Collected Poems: The Next Fifty Years

SUSAN HOWE

"All poetry is experimental poetry."
—Wallace Stevens

TIME AND AGAIN, without a word wasted, Marianne Moore captures what is specific to the "compact spontaneity," the "mastery of pause and tone" in Wallace Stevens' poems, while never forgetting their wit and play. For *Predilections* (1955), she ended her review of the first three collections (first published in *Poetry* [1937] and reprinted that same year in Morton Dauwen Zabel's ponderously titled *Literary Opinion in America: Essays Illustrating the Status, Methods, and Problems of Criticism in the United States in the Twentieth Century*) with the following condensed and strengthened conclusion: "As R. P. Blackmur has said, 'The poems rise like a tide.' They embody hope that in being frustrated becomes fortitude; and they prove to us that the testament to emotion is not volubility. Refusal to speak results here in an eloquence by which we are convinced that America has in Wallace Stevens at least one artist whom professionalism will never demolish" (35–36).

What does she mean by "professionalism"? Is Moore (one of three women out of fifty-six "critics of literature" included in Zabel's anthology) crying out against the moral and spiritual weakness of twentieth-century American cultural practice, or is this a more general admonishment against a characteristic failing of human perception? *Demolish*: to throw or pull down; reduce to ruins; lay waste; put an end to. Did she choose this ferocious verb because another world war was imminent? Is *demolish* meant to register accurately on our senses as sense-impressions come to a human spirit bearing love and sometimes terror? In *Predilections*, published during the Cold War, "Conjurings that Endure" is directly followed by her recomposed review of *Parts of a World* and *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, now titled "There Is a War That Never Ends." "Poetry Is a Destructive Force" is a Stevens poem she particularly admired.

In Peter Brazeau's oral biography, *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered*, Richard Wilbur recalled a Cambridge gathering after Stevens' 1952 poetry reading at Harvard, when the seventy-three-year-old poet talked at length about his three years spent there as an undergraduate

(1898–1900). To Wilbur's surprise, it was the philosophers who were the professors Stevens remembered, particularly Josiah Royce and George Santayana, while he made little mention of publishing poems in the *Advocate*, where he had served as an editor. Perhaps, looking back, Stevens understood that his calling had always been to address, by way of technical innovation and sound pattern, the same problematic his philosophy teachers had addressed discursively. "Poetry," he says in "Adagia," "must resist the intelligence almost successfully" (OP 197).

My favorite critical studies of artists tend to be by other artists. Henry James on Hawthorne, Shakespeare, and Balzac; D. H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature*; William Carlos Williams' *In the American Grain*; Charles Olson's *Call Me Ishmael*; H.D.'s *Tribute to Freud*; Robert Duncan's "The H.D. Book." Such efforts—even the essays in Marianne Moore's *Predilections*, or for that matter Stevens' *The Necessary Angel*—would be too eccentric, too chaotic and theoretically innocent for university presses to take a chance on these days. Stevens had the courage to be a difficult poet whose work is representative of the critical spirit.

As a poet, therefore actively interested in the craft of poetry, I am concerned with scholarship that relates to the close scrutiny of the manuscripts and personal library. However well intentioned the editing of his papers may have been (under the supervision of his daughter Holly, who seems to have exercised strong albeit dedicated control over a version of the life and manuscripts), during the next fifty years we need an effort along the lines of the Bollingen edition of Coleridge. After all, Stevens is our American Coleridge. This cooperative editorial labor will then be completed and corrected by other scholars and poets—the factual materials will lead to new mysteries of meaning. More specific work needs to be done on what remains of the poet's large book collection. He wanted his hands on these volumes, he valued them as material objects, and he valued the process of acquiring them from book dealers. So far the checklists by Milton Bates, William Ingoldsby, and Robert Moynihan are fine, but I am talking about work that consults specific books on their lists—the sort of work Charles Olson and others did on Herman Melville's library. We need more attention to his marginal markings in his copies of *The Book of Psalms translated out of the Original Hebrew*, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, *Thomas Campion's Songs and Masques*, *Charles Mauron's Aesthetics and Psychology*, etc. We need an edition of the letters between Thomas McGreevy and Stevens, not just the one-way exchange we have now. Most important, a new *complete* edition of the early journals is needed.

For Stevens—living as he did in a secular age—poetry is a religious calling and discipline. From beginning to end his writing is filled with associations of Protestantism and, after *Harmonium*, increasingly anchored in the depths of his local Pennsylvania and Connecticut past. He often reminds me of Jonathan Edwards. Edwards, who was born and grew up in East Windsor, Connecticut, where his father was a minister, and who

spent most of his life in and around the Connecticut River valley, was prepared to stake everything on the assurance that words that were disciplined into becoming “naked” embodiments of ideas could become, for ordinary people, the way to have visions beyond scripture. According to Perry Miller, “Affection” in Edwards’ use of the term is the passion of a mind bent on a particular object but without its actual presence. The word stands in for the object. So the words you choose must be perfect. In “Adagia,” when Stevens writes, “In poetry, you must love the words, the ideas and images and rhythms with all your capacity to love anything at all” (*OP* 188), he means it. For both men, the problem of God’s hiddenness is not a problem of evidence but of grace.

In his early journal (1902), the twenty-two-year-old law student, then living in New York, noted: “I went to hear Dr Morgan preach an exceptionally beautiful sermon on the powers and principalities of heaven. It was old fashioned—no boasting or bragging of new thought, but a lament that in this world the good are polluted and the pure, ruined. Angels have visited the earth and there are angels all about us now—and roaring lions” (*WAS* 9).

The persistent difficulty of Wallace Stevens’ poetry is heroic. This North American poet sets an example of uncompromising dedication to work that is not greed. His interpretive consciousness is moral in terms of historical sense and the needs and conscience of other readers. Maybe that is what Moore meant when she said that in him America had an example of one artist whom professionalism will never demolish.

At the Huntington Library, her terse letters (and handwritten postcards), carefully preserved in their original stamped envelopes, mark her pleasure in the disruptive logic of his work address.

Mr. Wallace Stevens
The Hartford Accident & Indemnity Company
690 Asylum Avenue
Hartford, 15, Connecticut

In 1951 she mailed him the following:

I have received THE NECESSARY ANGEL and thank you. In thinking of angels as strengtheners, I see that I have not been amiss.

State University at Buffalo

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Wallace Stevens and Two Types of Vanity

MASSIMO BACIGALUPO

WALT WHITMAN SAID, "I teach straying from me, yet who can stray from me?" (85). Stevens left lots of freedom to the reader, wrote essentially to please himself and with an implicit moral purpose of leading his companions to "The ultimate elegance, the imagined land" (*CP* 250). He spoke with quiet authority, without making noisy claims for attention, in a sort of take-it-or-leave-it fashion, not fearing to be difficult and forbidding. He said what he thought, rather densely, but ultimately seeking revelation, epiphany, by accumulation and tireless experiment. Unlike "[t]he simple News" (J 441) of that other outspoken New Englander, Emily Dickinson, his poetry did not try to do justice to phenomena and psychic processes; it did not speak colloquially, but went after a kind of musical expression, a representation of a dispassionate mind reflecting on itself and naming the world from a distance, as in a legal brief where facts and events are ritualized and detached from each other to be amenable to a structured inductive or deductive process. By not courting and in fact repelling the reader, but by instead presenting him with consistently perfect and impenetrable artifacts, Stevens has been able to attract a discriminating audience among scholars, poets and artists, the ideal readership that enjoys beautiful things and responds to his well-groomed fastidiousness. After all, if so many people tune in for a Mozart concert, an equal number should keep the *Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* on their night table.

As a matter of fact, reading for meditation, which used to be done a lot with the Bible, is probably a less common activity today. Reading is a solitary pleasure and, as Stevens admitted, we like to move on to the new, unless we are teaching the classics, and then we inevitably discover that we do not know them half as well as we thought. There are also times in anyone's life when there may be a need for words to remind us of central values and to console us, and on such occasions we may turn, in lieu of the Bible, to *King Lear*, "Little Gidding," or "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," which attempts to fill the emptiness of death with imagination. Stevens' poem is surely the most arcane of these lay scriptures, but he stands well the test of high seriousness, despite his irrepressible levity (something he has in common with T. S. Eliot: celibate austerity and the practical joke).

Whitman seemed to be more at ease in his elegy for Lincoln, and perhaps this shows how much darker is the mind-set of the twentieth than the nineteenth century. When we come from the adamant declarations and the music of Whitman to the somewhat tortured musings of Eliot or Stevens, it is as if there were a disturbance of speech. In fact Stevens did talk of "the pressure of reality" (NA 36), which he withstood wonderfully but at a cost. Dickinson is today possibly more widely read in the world than any other American poet; Eliot has an existential reputation that has made him internationally renowned; Stevens (it must be admitted) is caviar to the general.

In the small world of international poetry Stevens has obtained some recognition, but books of his poetry in other languages are not easy to come by, and in continental Europe one could more readily find editions, say, of Sylvia Plath or Allen Ginsberg than of Stevens, who will chiefly be represented in anthologies by a handful of poems. Is he therefore a writer like Edwin Arlington Robinson, the author of long poems that are surely serious, competent, and challenging, but are mostly left unread? At least Stevens' work is concentrated in a relatively small compass of pages, and his *Collected Poems* will remain on the poets' shelf and will not become stale, although one knows what one will find there if one opens it at random: "One sparrow is worth a thousand gulls, / When it sings. The gull sits on chimney-tops" (CP 233).

Translating Stevens is difficult but not impossible. In fact, since his words are rather abstract and his lyrics are what used to be called "pseudo-statements," that is, they mimic the logic of thought while evading it, he may be easier to translate than a poet more embedded in a culture, say Robert Frost, where the nuances of tone count for so much and where he expects the reader to be familiar with the landscapes (mental and natural) he describes in medias res. Stevens does nothing of the kind, living as he does in a sparsely populated world. There is little dialogue in him, or social innuendo, although I suppose in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" the word "boys" is not just an abstract reference to young males, but is to be understood in the context of class and color. Tricky Stevens.

In Italy, for example, Stevens has a small but discriminate following, and since 1954 some five or six books of his work have appeared, in fact probably more than in any other non-English speaking country. On the other hand, criticism of Stevens abroad is mostly limited to introductions and apparatuses for the various translations, since "English" is not so much an institution as in the United States, and chairs in American literature are usually a minority compared to those in British literature. Yet, since this gathering is taking place at Storrs, I would like to mention an early distinguished reading of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," by the Italian scholar Glauco Cambon (1921-1988), who taught at the University of Connecticut and for all I know was the first Storrs professor to write extensively on the poet of poets in Connecticut. His essay appeared in Italian in *Tematica e*

sviluppo della poesia americana (1956), then in English in *The Inclusive Flame: Studies in Modern American Poetry* (1963). Cambon also translated “Notes” as early as 1954, surely a record, and I have reprinted this version in *Harmonium: Poesie 1915–1955*, an ample selection of Stevens poems that appeared in Italy in 1994. Here at Storrs the Special Collections department has a file of Cambon’s correspondence with many associates, including the poet Eugenio Montale, who reviewed Stevens in 1954 and was later to win the Nobel Prize for literature (1975). Cambon was also friendly with Irma Brandeis, a Dante scholar of Bard College, who was a muse of Montale’s and a close friend of one of Stevens’ major descendants, James Merrill (see Merrill’s memoir *A Different Person*). So through Glauco Cambon we can place Stevens in an international constellation that eventually takes us back to Connecticut. One of the finest appreciations of Stevens is the one provided by Merrill in the *Voices & Visions* documentary, where he quietly reads “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour,” one of the great late poems.

Stevens is exciting to translate, and travels well, especially his less opaque final work, which to this translator has given great pleasure. In “The Rock” Stevens descended to some extent “In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart” (Yeats 336) insofar as so mandarin a poet could descend where all the ladders start. In “The Planet on the Table,” he modestly appraised the *Collected Poems* and his life’s work and said beautifully:

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

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

Stevens had celebrated more grandiosely the sense of ending in one of his great set pieces, “To an Old Philosopher in Rome,” where the word “grandeur” resonates several times—i.e., the traditional sublime. In “The Planet on the Table” he makes a modest disclaimer, pointing to the generosity and wonder of the planet itself, of which the poems are but imperfect reflections. “Ariel was glad he had written his poems” (*CP* 532). This is very straightforward, though the choice of Ariel as an alias, rather than Prospero who would be the more apt analogue, shows the residual playfulness of the poet, who liked words “to sound wrong” (*L* 340). Nothing could be less like Ariel than the formidable Wallace Stevens. And yet the reference to the actual writing of poems leaves little doubt that the reflection is personal. In the context of this brief summation Stevens stakes a claim for the permanence of writing. It is a product of the sun, by the agency of the poet, but “Other makings of the sun / Were waste and wel-

ter" (CP 532). This implies that the planet on the table has the advantage of permanence, something Stevens also points out elsewhere: writing and expression as a means of fixing something at least for a time—a lifetime—not allowing it to escape. A mood, an impulse.

Here we can also find a point of contact with the modesty and self-congratulation of Ezra Pound in the "Pull down thy vanity" Pisan canto, where he instructs us magisterially to "learn from the green world" (i.e., from the planet) "what can be thy place," that is, a rather unimportant one, then in the reversal famously declares: "But to have done instead of not doing / this is not vanity" (Canto LXXXI). Despite his biblical gesturing, by "vanity" Pound means pride, not (as in Ecclesiastes' "vanity of vanities") "that which is vain or empty, idle, or useless" (*Webster's International*). Stevens, although he modestly assesses his poems as unimportant (thus renouncing vanity in the sense of pride), is more concerned with vanity in the other sense, i.e., the meaning or lack of meaning in life. "I wonder, have I lived a skeleton's life?" he asks in "As You Leave the Room." Is it all vanity? And the answer is no. Stevens gathers assurance that his life has not been empty from his poems "About the mind as never satisfied," "About summer," etc., but he finally turns for confirmation to the world of sensation at its weakest; in this instance the proof of life is "the snow I had forgotten" (OP 117). Stevens the Snow Man once again contemplates the bleak winter scene, "As if nothingness contained a métier" (CP 526). In the final poem of the volume that we are here today to celebrate, his touchstone is a faint bird cry, somehow related to the grand procession of the sun, as the poet's faint or poor words are to the generosity of the planet.

These are traditional sentiments, perhaps fictions made up because of a necessity. They imply our assent, as belonging to the same Western tradition, although metamorphosed somewhat strangely in the barren climate of the new world. In Stevens there is under the playfulness a good deal of sadness, as in his perennial search for "what will suffice" (CP 240), which is after all very little. He was an affluent poet of poverty, who remained attached to a model of the poem as a chant soothing the unsatisfied and struggling mind. How very solitary this chant, this lullaby that the old man-child sings to himself:

It is a child that sings itself to sleep,
The mind, among the creatures that it makes,
The people, those by which it lives and dies. (CP 436)

Three parallel phrases, themselves soothing and a little hazy as the state between waking and sleeping.

Unflinching and unsentimental, Wallace Stevens is moving because he gives away so little and is susceptible only to deep, flood-like emotion. At the distance of fifty years we probably understand him better and have

lost none of our admiration for the perfect poet. In fifty years' time we hope more capable imaginations will be dealing with him and learning from him " 'to live in the world of creation' " (a favorite Henry James quotation [L 506]) and to make it new, another of his great themes, though I express it with the words of his disgraced contemporary Pound. One of his most eloquent poems is the late and mostly ignored "St. Armorer's Church from the Outside," with its praise of the chapel of air that the poet builds ("his own, his period" [CP 529]), and its final evocation of total ease.

Is Stevens a poet who invites us to evade reality by offering what will suffice and by even claiming that the soldier dies gladly, thanks to the poet's proper words (CP 408)? His disengagement is often disturbing, and there is a risk that he appeal to our fondness for circular and self-defensive rhetoric, something at which academics excel. However, he has created a world of depth, and for such sentiments of grandeur and modesty and such habits of perfection it is to be hoped that there always will be a responsive audience. *Collected Poems* will be a document for the "Children picking up our bones" (CP 158), telling them what things used to touch us, what could suffice, and that such miracles of ingenuity and emotional clairvoyance were accomplished in our time.

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Position Paper: Wallace Stevens

CHRISTIAN WIMAN

I HAVE BEEN ASKED to speculate on the future influence of Wallace Stevens' work on both academic scholarship and poets. About Stevens studies, I am afraid my ignorance is absolute. I have, finally, learned to keep quiet at such moments. About Stevens' likely effect on future poets, I can only offer a conditional: if Wallace Stevens is a master influence in fifty years, if the best poets of America look to him as an avatar of integrity and accomplishment, if their subjects are his subjects, their passions and stances ones by which we recognize him—then the break between poetry and American culture will be complete, poets will have made their final retreat from the world in which ordinary men and women live, and those of us who are devoted to poetry will have become such absurdly specialized and grotesquely sensitive creatures that conferences like this one will have to occur in some huge bubble to keep us all from getting infected by the real world.

Let me explain. I have never found Wallace Stevens a particularly "companionable" poet. He is a great poet, yes, most definitely: as odd as it may seem to think of a hyper-sophisticated and cerebral poet like Stevens as a "raw" talent, that is how he has always seemed to me—genius just blazing away in line after line. I am in awe of him. But there is something inhuman and unrooted and remote about that genius, something that—even in the best poems, even in the poems I have by heart—I find both impenetrable and unpenetrating. All of my judgments about Stevens are colored by this.

"The greatest poverty," Stevens writes in "Esthétique du Mal," "is not to live / In a physical world, to feel that one's desire / Is too difficult to tell from despair" (*CP* 325). Those are lovely lines, poignant, too, in that they are self-diagnosing. The irony of much of Stevens' work is that it is an argument for the importance of the world made in a poetry that has largely abjured it. In some fundamental way, there is no particularity in Stevens; there are only varying degrees of abstraction. When he says "stone" or "tree" or "sky"—or, for that matter, "he" or "she"—there is never the sense of a specific, palpable thing or person, never the sense of anything other than an internal landscape.

The greatness of Stevens' early work is that it will often make you feel this detachment—which is indeed a kind of despair—formally. In poems like "Domination of Black," "A Postcard from the Volcano," and perhaps a dozen others, Stevens is thinking in sound, not in ideas. You *feel* in the poem's music what they are missing. He is a sort of Antaeus on tiptoes in these poems, singing of the world that is all his strength, but which he is just barely touching. The effect is both ravishing and haunting.

About midway through "The Man with the Blue Guitar," though, he is off the earth entirely, tethered to it *only* by ideas. I know there are people who love the later work, who think that *Transport to Summer* and *The Auroras of Autumn* contain great poems of the twentieth century. My own feeling is that this level of abstraction is death for a poet—and for poetry in general. The later work seems to me not only written to be studied, but obsessively, meticulously, corrosively studying itself. It is a dead end.

Perhaps some great poet will in fact emerge out of Stevens, will be able to meld his extreme genius for sound and form with a more immediate feeling for and experience of the world and living people. Frankly, though, this seems to me more likely to happen in a hundred years than in fifty. I think the times demand—and the survival of poetry demands—poets whose commitment to specific places, things, and people might very well preclude the kind of aesthetic perfection and purity that Stevens achieved. In fact, I think the greatest poet of the next fifty years might very well be repelled by Stevens and react directly against him—though, of course, that kind of repulsive reaction does amount to strong influence.

Editor, *Poetry*

Stevens' *Collected Poems* in 2054

MARJORIE PERLOFF

LIKE MANY READERS of my generation, I first discovered Wallace Stevens during my high school years in the anthologies we used as textbooks. All these seemed to include—as does, for example, Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair's *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, recently updated by Jahan Ramazani—those now-canonical poems from *Harmonium* (1923): "Sunday Morning," "Peter Quince at the Clavier," "Disillusionment of Ten O'clock," "Domination of Black," "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," and "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." Later, I came to prefer to these sensuous lyrics, the austere, spare, more "profound" poems of *The Auroras of Autumn* and *The Rock*. Indeed, my first published essay was called "Irony in Wallace Stevens' *The Rock*" and appeared in *American Literature* in 1964.

Four decades later, paradoxically, it is Stevens' early lyrics that once again strike me as his most brilliant. I find myself drawn to the sheer gorgeousness of

Complacencies of the peignoir, and late
Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
And the green freedom of a cockatoo
Upon a rug mingle to dissipate
The holy hush of ancient sacrifice. (CP 66–67)

When I first read these lines from "Sunday Morning" (1915), I paid little attention to the poem's metaphysics: its contemplation of the relation between the transient and the eternal, the sensuous and the abstract, the natural and supernatural. No, what I found thrilling, and still do, is the way form *is* meaning in that opening line, where the blank verse rhythm is distorted so wholly that the sound is that of a long yawn—"Complacencies of the peignóir"—with its five unstressed syllables between the two stressed ones. Then, too, this line subtly uses transferred epithet: the complacencies belonging not to the woman in question but to her "peignoir," and the sun seeming to adhere to the "chair," in which she sampled her "Coffee and oranges." The color imagery is striking: the brown and orange are now enhanced by "the green freedom of a cockatoo / Upon a

rug." What a lovely way to spend Sunday morning, the "freedom" of the cockatoo, let out of its cage, seeming to be the lady in the peignoir's freedom as well. The lines, moreover, are phonemically charged, culminating in the alliteration of *h* and *sh* sounds and harsh spirants and fricatives of "sacrifice." Stevens comes down heavily on that final word "sacrifice," for it is that "ancient sacrifice" of Christian rite that the poem's speaker is rejecting.

If the beginning of "Sunday Morning" is immediately enchanting, so is the poem's ending, with its ambiguous "island solitude, unsponsored, free, / Of that wide water, inescapable," and its culmination in the pigeons circling "Downward to darkness, on extended wings" (CP 70). It is not that Stevens' poem *says* anything especially new about the finality of death or the false comforts of paradise—indeed, its tropes and motifs derive almost wholly from its romantic forebears—but that its language and rhythm are so remarkable. The same is true, I think, of the poem that follows "Sunday Morning" in the new Norton: namely, "Peter Quince at the Clavier." To read this meditation on memory and desire in the context of its 1915 contemporaries—say, Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* or Amy Lowell's "Patterns," or Robert Frost's "Oven Bird"—is to marvel at its sensuous immediacy:

Music is feeling, then, not sound,
And thus it is that what I feel,
Here in this room, desiring you,

Thinking of your blue-shadowed silk,
Is music. (CP 90)

"Blue-shadowed" is the key word here, describing as it does not only the beloved's silk dress but also the echo or shadow structure of the whole poem where music becomes feeling becomes memory narrative. And "Peter Quince" is also very much a poem of touch:

In the green water, clear and warm,
Susanna lay.
She searched
The touch of springs,
And found
Concealed imaginings. . . . (CP 90)

"The touch of springs," in this passage, leads straight to the "fitful tracing of a portal" in the poem's coda and then to the lines, "Susanna's music touched the bawdy strings / Of those white elders; but, escaping, / Left only Death's ironic scraping" (CP 92). Touch becomes less attractive as the

poem moves to its conclusion, with its removal from the “real” world to one of musical/religious vocabulary:

Now, in its immortality, it plays
On the clear viol of her memory,
And makes a constant sacrament of praise. (CP 92)

In memory, sound replaces touch; the “constant sacrament of praise” seems to exact a toll.

What is to my mind the greatest poem in *Harmonium* is “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” (1917). The sequence of thirteen haiku-like minimalist lyrics has received a good deal of attention but it never ceases to repay study. Consider, for starters, its particular dialectic of black/white, movement/stasis, presence/absence, lyric/narrative, “I”/“he,” straight edge/circle:

Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird. (CP 92)

Is this opening tercet, as is often claimed, inspired by Japanese brush painting? Not really, for there is no way to see or even visualize that tiny eye moving against the background of the twenty snowy mountains. What the proto-Surrealist opening asserts, accordingly, is that empiricism does not work, that there can be no way to define actual perception. Indeed, the adjectives in *-y-*“twenty snowy”— sound almost silly. Now look at section II:

I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds. (CP 92)

Again, this is not just a juxtaposition of the one and the many. A tree has no mind, but the comparison of poet to tree works here because “tree” rhymes with “three,” as if to say that sound repetition can itself yield analogies.

So it goes in section after section, none of them alike and yet all related by their concern for what Marcel Duchamp called the *infrathin*—the smallest possible differential between one image or object and another. As Stevens puts it in IX:

When the blackbird flew out of sight,
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles. (CP 94)

And in XII, the poet gives us a neatly stated non-sequitur:

The river is moving.
The blackbird must be flying. (CP 94)

In the end (XIII), there is only the sadness of closure—closure now and to come for the “thing itself,” here seen as the blackbird:

It was evening all afternoon.
It was snowing
And it was going to snow.
The blackbird sat
In the cedar-limbs. (CP 95)

It is the third line above that is so moving. After all the subtle shifts recorded in the poem, there is finally nothing left but finality. It is a perfect poetic moment.

The common wisdom in Stevens scholarship is that the *Harmonium* poems mark only a beginning for what is a profound poetic career in which the phenomenology of Being and Becoming plays the central role. Much has been made of such later long sequences as “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” (1942) as representing the height of Stevens’ poetic career. Since I have raised questions about the success of “Notes” elsewhere (see “‘Revolving in Crystal’”), I will not repeat myself here. But the ethos of “Notes” notwithstanding, my hunch is that fifty years from now, it will be the earlier poems in the *Collected Poems* that will be read most enthusiastically. In their intensity and density, such poems as “Thirteen Ways” and “Earthy Anecdote,” “Sunday Morning” and “Ploughing on Sunday” anticipate, not, as is sometimes argued, the dense metaphoric 1950s’ poetry of a James Merrill or a Robert Penn Warren, but the Minimalist/Conceptualist art of the sixties, where the Imagist thrust of a given poem is undercut by the curious silence that accompanies it. What happens after “The blackbird sat / In the cedar-limbs”? Is the finality that of death? Does the scene become one of frozen immobility and cold pastoral? Stevens never tells us. In the *Harmonium* poems, his silences are nothing short of enchanting:

The white cock’s tail
Streams to the moon.
Water in the fields.
The wind pours down. (CP 20)

It merely is: the Snow Man’s “Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” (CP 10).

My hunch is that the readers of 2054 will be drawn to the earlier lyric Stevens rather than Stevens the philosopher, Stevens the thinker, Stevens

the negotiator between self and world. There are, of course, great poems in every one of his volumes, but there are also blank patches, as in the following stanza from "Chocorua to its Neighbor":

The cry is part. My solitaria
Are the meditations of a central mind.
I hear the motions of the spirit and the sound
Of what is secret becomes, for me, a voice
That is my own voice speaking in my ear. (CP 298)

Such "solitaria," such "meditations of a central mind" come to have a chilly remoteness. They make me long for the complacencies of the peignoir and the green freedom of a cockatoo upon a rug. Or indeed for the following of the "Thirteen Ways":

Icicles filled the long window
With barbaric glass.
The shadow of the blackbird
Crossed it, to and fro. (CP 93)

An ominous crossing, especially in the face of those "barbaric" icicles. In such moments—and there are many in the *Collected Poems*—Stevens' language casts the longest possible shadow.

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Wallace Stevens: Memory, Dead and Alive

HELEN VENDLER

I WANT TO REFLECT on memory in Wallace Stevens—both memory seen as defective, whether it is the iterable memory of sense-experience or the nostalgic memory of one's emotional life, and memory seen as resurrective, as in "The Rock." My interest in memory in Stevens arose from my bafflement before a piece I admired, "Arcades of Philadelphia the Past," published in *Parts of a World* (1942). Among Stevens' poems, "Arcades" is unusual in being more surreal than most, and its chief, and most shocking, surreal feature is the image of men holding their eyes in their hands.¹

There they sit, holding their eyes in their hands.

.....

They polish their eyes
In their hands. (CP 225)

The eyes are no longer flesh; they have hardened to agate, and at the moment of the poem they are reflecting in their polished surface an image of lilac bushes, varying in color. In thinking about this poem, I was led to recall other Stevensian mentions of lilacs, not only in *Harmonium's* "Last Looks at the Lilacs" (1923) but also in "Things of August" from *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950). Because of the problems raised by "Arcades of Philadelphia the Past" I also found myself looking across the page from it in the *Collected Poems*, and seeing "A Dish of Peaches in Russia." As these poems came together in my mind, I felt that one could say about Stevens what George Herbert said about Bible verses in "The H. Scriptures II":

Oh that I knew how all thy lights combine,
And the configurations of their glorie!
Seeing not onely how each verse doth shine,
But all the constellations of the storie.
This verse marks that, and both do make a motion
Unto a third, that ten leaves off doth lie. . . . (58)

Stevens' constellations are mutually illuminating in this way, and propinquity within the *Collected Poems*—as with "Arcades" and "Peaches"—is

often a sign of an imaginative relation between poems. Because memory is one of the oldest themes in lyric, and because Stevens' interest in memory evokes Wordsworth more than any other predecessor, I also hoped to see what was distinctive and non-Wordsworthian about Stevens' work with this time-honored idea.

In thinking about memory in Stevens, then, I begin with a non-Wordsworthian poem, "A Dish of Peaches in Russia," which, though it will ultimately concern itself with memory, begins with an ecstatic sense-experience in the present. The poem is spoken, in "naïve" couplets, by a Russian in exile who, confronted with a dish of peaches exactly like those of his native village, at first rejoices in the sense-stimuli offered him by the fruits, which are identical in color, smell, touch, and taste to the peaches of his former life. He comments on the peaches with the gratitude of a sensualist:

With my whole body I taste these peaches,
I touch them and smell them. (*CP* 224)

After an interposition—to which I will return—the excited sense-perception makes itself felt once again:

The peaches are large and round,

Ah! and red; and they have peach fuzz, ah!
They are full of juice and the skin is soft. (*CP* 224)

The senses of sight, taste, touch, and smell are fully satisfied by these peaches. But these fruits, in spite of their species-identity, are nonetheless not the peaches of the Russian's village. He is "that exile, for whom / The bells of the chapel pullulate sounds at / Heart," and the heart is an organ incommensurable with the organs of the senses.² Although the speaker attempts to assimilate the present peaches to the past ones in Russia, by saying of the present peaches "They are full of the colors of my village," he cannot, finally, keep at arm's length a desperate disappointment:

I did not know

That such ferocities could tear
One self from another, as these peaches do. (*CP* 224)

Past sense-memory—because it is embedded in past emotional experience—cannot be repeated or recovered, even if an identical sense-satisfaction is available in the present. The exile is torn in two precisely because the present peaches are, to the senses, absolutely indistinguishable from the past peaches. It is only to the heart that they are not comparable with the peaches of the vanished village. One part of the exile is dead and can-

not be resuscitated by eating sense-simulacra in America. For this theoretical experiment, Stevens has kept one set of stimuli—those of the senses—constant in memory and in actuality, thus putting into relief the part of memory that frustratingly recalls the irrecoverably past gratification generated by the synesthesia of the Russian peaches and the sound of familiar bells.

When Stevens turns—in “Arcades of Philadelphia the Past”—to life-memory in general, he does not find it a rich and renovating source, as Wordsworth did in recalling his “spots of time.” Rather, Stevens is taken aback by the poverty of memory. When we summon up the past, it is usually, he says, in the form of a set of visual images. We cannot—according to “Arcades,” hear the past—or touch it or taste it or smell it. How odd it is that we can only see the past, that no other sense (in Stevens’ view here) has the capacity to return and reproduce itself in memory.³ In “Arcades,” the poet takes as axiomatic that the only people who are drawn to recalling the past are those who have riches (now lost) to remember. Those previous riches can be those of the senses (strawberries), of foreign travel (the Apennines), or of local region (Philadelphia):

Only the rich remember the past,
The strawberries once in the Apennines,
Philadelphia that the spiders ate. (CP 225)

After this overture, Stevens describes for us the crowd of rememberers who populate “Arcades.” He invokes, in picturing them, the Miltonic simile from *Paradise Lost* in which the fallen angels in hell are said to be thick as leaves in Vallombrosa, that shady valley high in the Apennines:

[H]e stood and call’d
His legions, Angel Forms, who lay intrans’d
Thick as Autumnal Leaves that strow the Brooks
In *Vallombrosa*, where th’ *Etrurian* shades
High overarch’t imbow’r. . . . (l.300–04)

Those attempting to remember the past, Stevens suggests, are themselves in a kind of hell, in which, although they can see the past as in a silent movie, they can no longer hear it, nor touch it, nor smell it, nor feel it:

There they sit, holding their eyes in their hands.
Queer, in this Vallombrosa of ears,
That they never hear the past.

.....
Do they touch the thing they see,
Feel the wind of it, smell the dust of it?
They do not touch it. Sounds never rise

Out of what they see. They polish their eyes
In their hands. (CP 225)

In the midst of this catalogue of the deprivations of memory, the speaker inserts, almost parenthetically,

To see,
To hear, to touch, to taste, to smell, that's now,
That's this. (CP 225)

But he seems for some reason profoundly uninterested in pursuing the attractions of "now" and "this": for the moment, he is obsessed with the inadequacies of memory.

The next movement of the poem concerns lilac bushes, which come to be symbols of an erotic, but frustrated, romance, in which the love associated with lilacs and "the town" (presumably Philadelphia) never succeeded in their attempt to coalesce:

The lilacs came long after.
But the town and the fragrance were never one,
Though the blue bushes bloomed—and bloom,
Still bloom in the agate eyes, red blue,
Red purple, never quite red itself. (CP 225)

The rememberers stare yearningly at the reflections of the lilacs in the agate eyes, which, peculiarly, mirror nothing of the past but the lilacs. However, the fluctuating colors of memory never quite approximate life itself—the unequivocal sun's red of the Stevensian real—but remain approximations of the vanished color, red blue, red purple. Nonetheless, the lilacs continue to bloom in those gazing-globes, the agate eyes, held in the palm of the commemorative hands. The preciousness of the visual lilac-memory means that the speaker can dismiss as worthless all the other senses and end with a triumphant reiteration of the power of sight-memory:

The tongue, the fingers, and the nose
Are comic trash, the ears are dirt,
But the eyes are men in the palm of the hand. (CP 225)

If, trying to remember the past, one cannot resuscitate the full sensory gamut of iterable stimuli—the dish of peaches—one can at least count on the persistence—if slightly discolored, slightly diminished—of sight.

But after this claim, the earlier slighting reference to the availability of full sense-experience in the now, the this, reasserts itself. We discover why the speaker avoids the now, the this:

This? A man must be very poor
With a single sense . . .
.....
Of poorness as an earth. . . . (CP 225)

In the present speaker, his sense of metaphysical and all-extensive poverty, of loss, has extirpated the potential pleasures of all the physical senses. If he senses only poverty, everywhere he looks, everywhere he exercises his five usual senses, what good are the senses at all? He smells clouds, not fragrance; he redundantly *sees* the *sea*, not the vanished lilacs; when he finds a woman to touch, she is cadaverous; when he tries to taste foods, he finds "Dry seconds and insipid thirds"; and when he tries to speak, he finds he cannot utter a word, though he eerily hears interiorly what he would want to say:

This? A man must be very poor
With a single sense, though he smells clouds,
Or to see the sea on Sunday, or
To touch a woman cadaverous,
Of poorness as an earth, to taste
Dry seconds and insipid thirds,
To hear himself and not to speak. (CP 225)

I will return in a moment to Stevens' peculiar syntax in these ungrammatical lines. Having found the present so inadequate to desire, the speaker thinks to return to the riches of memory, only to find that to re-summon those riches now—after having tasted actuality, however dry and insipid—is to render them ineffectual, artificial, damaged, inauthentic:

The strawberries once in the Apennines . . .
They seem a little painted, now.
The mountains are scratched and used, clear fakes. (CP 226)

This three-line coda is devised to match the three-line overture, but while the genuineness of strawberries and mountains does not survive, the receding memorial arcades of Philadelphia the past remain unmentioned in this conclusion, are preserved from absolute dismissal. The town is spider-devoured, but its arcades still make an airy roof over the garden where the lilacs flowered; and the lilacs are still blooming in the agate eyes; and so the memorial part of the vanished city has not yet become "painted" or "scratched and used," or a "fake."

How to treat a romance that turned out badly is a question that preoccupied Stevens even in *Harmonium*, where he had announced, as early as the third poem, that "The lilacs wither in the Carolinas" (CP 4). In "Last Looks at the Lilacs," a lover perceives that his beloved, disappointed in

him, has turned away from his embrace to dream of the ideal masculine lover of her imagination, the "Don John, / Who will embrace her before summer comes" (CP 49). The poem is savagely ironic, as the poet-speaker addresses himself as "caliper," the measurer of the embrace, and "Poor buffo!" the fool. He once loved the lavender lilacs; now they are to him nothing but trash. The "divine ingénue," his companion, turns her dissatisfaction with him into unreal dreams of a swaggering lover ("Well-booted, rugged, arrogantly male"), but the speaker, once he realizes her disaffection from his insufficiently masculine self, does not, on his part, dream of a better beloved to console him. He is too deep in loss and too skeptical for a new emotional adventure:

Poor buffo! Look at the lavender
And look your last and look still steadily,
And say how it comes that you see
Nothing but trash and that you no longer feel
Her body quivering in the Floréal.⁴ (CP 49)

The speaker's bitter denial of value to the lilacs ("Nothing but trash"), and his assertion that he no longer feels desire for the beloved are both given the lie in "Arcades of Philadelphia the Past": the lilacs, in their changing spectrum of obsessively regarded but imperfect colors, continue to bloom and bloom in the agate eyes of the reminiscent mind, preserved in the writerly hand. When Stevens realizes, as he later does in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," that the erotic and its souvenirs, however blighted, can be ultimately considered one of life's blessings, even after they have been lost, he recovers the smell of the lilacs and creates their synaesthetic "purple odor," allowing in "Notes" a suffusion of recall more complete than that of "Arcades of Philadelphia the Past." But this memory in "Notes" "evok[es] nothing," is a Platonic "absolute," unattached to any past ingénue:

Tonight the lilacs magnify
The easy passion, the ever-ready love
Of the lover that lies within us and we breathe

An odor evoking nothing, absolute.
We encounter in the dead middle of the night
The purple odor, the abundant bloom. (CP 394-95]

Still later, in "Things of August," Stevens has come to admit that the death of love, like any other death in nature, is natural. It is our mother the earth, from whom we have derived our riches, who conceals always the fatal dagger she will one day direct at us. The smell of the lilacs survives their inhumation, but to the pure and detached smell no associa-

tions, whether of myth (Persephone) or of life (“the widow Dooley”) can be attached:

The sad smell of the lilacs—one remembered it,
Not as the fragrance of Persephone,
Nor of a widow Dooley,
But as of an exhumation returned to earth,

The rich earth, of its own self made rich. . . .

.....
The sentiment of the fatal is a part
Of filial love. Or is it the element, . . .

.....
An arrogant dagger darting its arrogance,

In the parent’s hand, perhaps parental love?
One wished that there had been a season,
Longer and later, in which the lilacs opened
And spread about them a warmer, rosier odor. (CP 491)

The phallic power of the imagined arrogant rival lover in “Last Looks at the Lilacs” has been transferred in “Things of August” to the maternal earth itself, as—out of love, perhaps—she sends the dagger of death from her hand to her children’s hearts. Because the lilacs—here, as elsewhere, symbolic of sexual love—were originally exhumed from the earth, they have necessarily returned to the earth, like all living things. Stevens has come to know—and to love—the earth as the death-principle as well as the life-principle, but resignation to the inevitable biological cycle does not mean he is without regret. Love had to die, but did it have to live so very briefly and so stintedly? Surely the season could have been longer and later, surely the lilacs might have been allowed to produce their most authentic odor, embodying the warmth and blush of sustained and sustaining love. A residual bitterness accompanies, but does not vitiate, the Stevensian erotic memory here; the defects of actual memory are supplied by a fantasy of what, under better circumstances, life under the fragrance of the lilacs might have become.

In “The Rock,” the lilacs reappear for the last time, as Stevens offers a bleak picture of romantic love, so magical to the young, as merely an evolutionary biological phenomenon activated by “the sun’s design of its own happiness” (CP 525). The young man advances to the end of his family’s property, the young woman is making the same advance from her adjacent terrain: in the ordained moment, noon, at the height of the sexual warmth, they meet at the edge of the adjoining fields. The poet comments darkly:

The meeting at noon at the edge of the field seems like

An invention, an embrace between one desperate clod
And another in a fantastic consciousness,
In a queer assertion of humanity:

A theorem proposed between the two—
Two figures in a nature of the sun,
In the sun's design of its own happiness. (*CP* 525)

Yet this intellectual assessment of the Darwinian imperative motivating sexual conjunction gives way to a recollection of how it really felt to be sexually and romantically alive, the moment of the blooming lilacs and the musk of desire: it was

an illusion so desired

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

In a birth of sight. The blooming and the musk
Were being alive, an incessant being alive,
A particular of being, that gross universe. (*CP* 526)

This memory, actively recapturing the ecstatic emotions associated with the lilacs—the blooming and the sexual fragrance, the dazzling seeing and the humming aliveness—is more accurate to youthful experience than the wistful nostalgia of “Things of August,” more complete than the merely visual memory encapsulated in the shifting lilac-colors within the agate eyes, and much happier than the early self-loathing dismissals of “Last Looks at the Lilacs.”

With all the earlier and later appearances of the lilacs in mind, we can now return to “Arcades of Philadelphia the Past,” asking, this time, why it is composed as it is, and how the structure and language of the poem bear out its emotional freight, as Stevens reconsiders the deficiencies of memory. The overture has a tone, even if a sardonic one, of possible hope; one can at least, the speaker thinks, remember lost riches, even if one has no hope of reclaiming them: the spiders, after all, ate Philadelphia long ago. The coda, for its part, recognizes that the morose delectation described in the overture flattens very quickly into artifice. There is no nourishment in it; the strawberries are painted, now, like the deceptive grapes of Apelles; and memory is corrupted by repetition, like a record scratched and used. As for Philadelphia, except for its lilacs, it has been devoured.⁵

The central part of "Arcades," between the prologue and the coda, oscillates between an irrecoverable "then" and "that" and a poverty-stricken "now" and "this." This oscillation puts the poem fully in a Wordsworthian genre, the poem of dual consciousness, in which the "now"—with a variety of emotions—looks back on the "then." But in entombing the past in the flesh-deprived and petrified agate eyes, Stevens refuses the "liveliness" of the evoked Wordsworthian past and consequently does not have to undergo the Wordsworthian "fall," classically phrased in "Tintern Abbey": "That time is past, / And all its aching joys are now no more, / And all its dizzy raptures" (110). The shifting colors ("red blue, / Red purple, never quite red itself") that bloom in the agate eyes are asymptotic approaches to the first blooming of the erotic lilacs ("the blue bushes") but they are identical neither to the original actual lilacs nor to their "red" Platonic form, and never can be.

To the Wordsworthian "then" of the actual past and the "now" of the actual present, Stevens has added a third, spatialized, moment, the "there" of the present spot of time, in which the men remember the past: "There they sit, holding their eyes in their hands." Because of the ironic detachment of the speaker intent on describing the "there"—as though he were not writing about himself—the body of the poem persists in its intellectualizing moments. The speaker has perceived that only the rich remember the past, that it is "Queer" that the crowd of rememberers ("in this Vallombrosa of ears") possess sight but not hearing; he has decided firmly that all senses but sight are absolutely and always unattainable to remembrance ("Do they touch the thing they see [?] . . . / They do not touch it. Sounds never rise / Out of what they see." His judgments are final and devastating ("The tongue, the fingers, and the nose / Are comic trash, the ears are dirt").

In the midst of all this intellectualizing, perceiving, deciding, declaring, deriding, and judging sits the brief narrative of the lilac-blooming past. But even here, a cool evaluation of the past intrudes: "the town and the fragrance were never one. . . ." And although something that the men have lost is salvaged in the present agate blooming of the lilacs, the past blooming was biological, while the present is merely visually memorial, and approximate in coloring at that.

The frigidity of the purely visual memory drives the speaker (who as a poet is "polishing his eyes in his hands" as he writes down his memories) into the unaccommodating present, the poverty-stricken "now" and "this." As I said earlier, the elaborately accomplished diction of "Arcades" breaks down in this third stanza. Since the poet has declared that to possess all the senses is a property of the living present ("To see, / To hear, to touch, to taste, to smell, that's now, / That's this"), we are confused when he says "This? A man must be very poor / With a single sense. . . ." We had thought that only the rememberers had to get along with a single sense, their sense of sight. It is only as we continue reading that we see that the phrase "a

single sense" is completed, three lines later, by the complement "Of poorness as an earth. . . ." Apparently the sense of poorness, a planetary poorness pervading the earth, is enough to wipe out the potential of all the normal senses.⁶ The speaker makes a rhetorical concession—yes, the man does smell clouds, could see the sea on Sunday, could taste food dry and savorless as dust, could touch an unappealing cadaverous woman—but who would want to? The poison of felt poorness, that all-pervading single sense, invades and vitiates every other.

In this stanza of ultimate deprivation, the puzzle of syntax continues in the peculiar infinitives. Normally, in Stevens, the infinitive is the sign of joyous possibility, as in "The Latest Freed Man":

To be without a description of to be,
 For a moment on rising, at the edge of the bed, to be,

to be changed
 From a doctor into an ox, before standing up,
 To know that the change and that the ox-like struggle
 Come from the strength that is the strength of the
 sun. . . . (CP 205)

But here, like broken phrases reduced from their original wholeness, we find banal or repellent infinitives (with the archaic and therefore unsettling "or . . . or" substituted for the modern "either . . . or") occurring within a broken syntax that must be rearranged to make sense:

A man [though he smells clouds] must be very poor
 With a single sense [Of poorness as an earth]
 Or to see the sea on Sunday, or
 To touch a woman cadaverous . . .
[or] to taste
 Dry seconds, [or]
 To hear himself and not to speak.

How is it that the man encased in the oppressive poverty of "now" and "this" can smell clouds? This concession to sense-function and sense-presence works against the absolutism of the passage, in which the poet wants to argue that the sense of poorness annuls the normal working of the bodily senses. Poor though he be, the man cannot avoid smelling clouds, concedes the poet. The clouds in Stevens always have affinities with the blue of the sky and its connection to the imagination, but only invisible things—angels, Jove, the muse—inhabit Stevens' clouds. Clouds represent the realm of Ideas, where the Platonic paradigm of each thing exists in perpetuity, if in invisibility. "Smell" is an ethereal perception not attached to sight or hearing or taste or touch: no matter the speaker's sensual poverty, the

Idea of Lilac-Fragrance, its Platonic form, hovers in the clouds. To have no home but Plato may define the poorness of the poet when the body is entirely unmoved by normal sense-responsiveness.

It is Stevens' wish to enact his planetary sense of poorness that drives him to his conscious use of pictorial surrealism and to the trope of deliberate ungainliness of idiom. Sense-memory is easily summoned by language—"The strawberries once in the Apennines." Emotional memory—attempting to reenact the past real lilacs, the agate-blooming lilacs of the present, and the Platonic lilacs of pure fragrance—is harder to render and induces in Stevens the surrealism of the agate eyes, with their constantly changing colors, held in the palms of the rememberers. Stevens was interested in the use of the surreal in rendering the unconscious, but was careful about its use. As he says in "Materia Poetica":

The essential fault of surrealism is that it invents without discovering. To make a clam play an accordion is to invent not to discover. The observation of the unconscious, so far as it can be observed, should reveal things of which we have previously been unconscious. (*OP* 203)

From Stevens' observation of the unconscious, as it revealed to him the distinction between sense-memory and emotional memory, sprang the chilling surrealism of men—their eyes now turned to agate—contemplating the reflections blooming in those eyes extracted from their native skull and placed in the palms of the hands.

But if it is easy to render sense-memory, and possible—if only through surrealism—to render emotional memory, it seems impossible to render the paradoxical condition of activating all the bodily senses without enjoying them. Stevens must cross plenitude ("To see, / To hear, to touch, to taste, to smell, that's now, / That's this") with resistance to pleasure in these very activities. The exercise of the senses is usually considered involuntary: Wordsworth's Matthew, in "Expostulation and Reply," asserts:

"The eye—it cannot choose but see;
We cannot bid the ear be still;
Our bodies feel, where'er they be,
Against or with our will." (106)

Wordsworth does not here dramatize what it would be to have one's body feel against one's will. But that is precisely what Stevens has to do in showing that his speaker's senses stream outward while his mind denigrates their potential for reward. The conflict between mind and sense results in the fractured syntax and the stilted ratiocination of what he might do with his senses ("or this, or that"); the same conflict generates the surrealism of smelling clouds and tasting seconds and thirds. We are shown the dispel-

ling of desire by an anticlimactic postpositioned adverb (“on Sunday”) or adjective (“cadaverous”). The stand-off between mind and sense is summed up in the last paradox: “To hear himself and not to speak.” In the mind, the speaker hears what he would say were he not so impoverished; but his power of expression feels itself so greatly sapped by his sense of poorness that he does not—though he could—speak. It is his *not-speaking* that the very peculiar grammar, syntax, and diction of this stanza of the poem is contrived to communicate.

I return to Stevens’ predicament in writing “Arcades of Philadelphia the Past.” If, as he says in his “Adagia,” “All poetry is experimental poetry” (*OP* 187), then this poem makes the experiment of disengaging three states—the “then” of narrative memory (strawberries and Philadelphia), the “there” of emotional memory (agate eyes, shifting colors), and the “now” of the impoverishment of desire. “Then” is already codified for us in Wordsworthian narrative; for “there,” Stevens’ imagination had to reach into a surreal realm for a strikingly physical symbolic equivalent—the eyes in the palm of the hands—of emotional memory deprived of all but a single visual recourse; for the “now” Stevens had to invent an experimental discourse so distorted, so hobbled, so uncontemporary that his third stanza “resist[s] the intelligence / Almost successfully” (*CP* 350). Allowing this peculiar against-the-will nowness to subside into intelligibility in his coda might have seemed a retreat from experiment had not he introduced into the coda the ultimate subsidence of preserved memory into artifice and fraud. The strawberries and the Apennines are fakes; the lilacs, however, at the moment of writing, still have authenticity. Remembered long enough, will they too become painted fakes, or a record scratched and used? This is the question Stevens leaves open; but in his later poems, as he accepts the sexual lilac-blooming as necessary and mortality as equally necessary, the lilacs are permitted to bloom fully again, more alive in *The Rock* than they were in *Parts of a World*.

It is in watching Stevens’ self-revisions in the course of his writing that we construct a narrative about his predicaments as a poet. The making of a teleological evolutionary narrative out of Stevens’ creations has been called an imposition of the desire of the critic on evidence.⁷ If one believes, as I do, that it is necessary to construct such an explanatory narrative (if one has found successive phases, differently motivated, in Stevens’ creative life), then the vicissitudes of the lilacs of memory, from *Harmonium* to *The Rock*, create one such story. As even the simple dish of peaches carries not only sense-memory but emotional freight for the exiled Russian, so the lilacs—as a recurrent symbol for sexual and romantic love—demand from Stevens stylistic and thematic reformulation, early and late.

There are many meditations on memory, personal and collective, in Stevens, and they are urgently connected, for him, to the quality of life. Insofar as we remember, we are alive; when the agate eyes cease to mirror the lilacs, it will be useless to polish them; their surfaces will reflect nothing.

ing. When the sound of bells no longer germinates within the taste of peaches, the peaches become, for all their lusciousness to the tongue, dry seconds and insipid thirds. Behind every access of memory—of peaches, of lilacs—lurks the possible blank of terminal emotional frigidity, when—as in the fade-out of death for the “Anglais Mort à Florence”—“the colors deepened and grew small” (CP 149). The emotional loss in “A Dish of Peaches in Russia,” sudden and ferocious, becomes in “Arcades of Philadelphia the Past” an obsessive contemplation of lost romance, pervading everything. One might believe from “Arcades” that Stevens had fallen irrevocably into a view of memory as the locus of the petrified, the artificial, and the scratched and used, had he not allowed—against the sardonic and derisive drama of marriage in “The Rock”—the merciful influx of the living erotic musk and its lilac-fragrance, resurrected by memory in a form wholly alive. In his embers Stevens is the shaman of the past, not, like Wordsworth, closing on a nostalgia for “what was so fugitive,” but rather resurrecting the fled past in language claiming its original fullness as a particular of being. When Stevens names being “that gross universe,” he insists on the priority of physical responsiveness in the very idea of all existence. If memory is to be of any use, it must, as in “The Rock,” recreate that living grossness, rather than mimic the elegiac Wordsworthian regret. It would be worth while, given the prevalence of the theme of memory in Stevens, to track his many descriptions and enactings of memory and its phases far more fully than I have done here; it would be a way both to ally him to his romantic predecessors and, I believe, distinguish him securely, in the end, from them.

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Notes

¹The image recurs in “Page from a Tale.”

²The verb “pullulate,” originating from Latin *pullus* (young animal, young sprout, as in “pullet”), took on the metaphorical meaning “to teem, to germinate.” It is the generative activity of sense-memory crossed with emotion that Stevens wishes to emphasize, since it is that which is lost when sense-response is present but human emotion is absent.

³This assertion may be a form of special pleading for the purposes of this poem, since Proust’s Swann certainly remembers the “phrase de Vinteuil,” and Keats deeply remembers taste on several occasions.

⁴There were in Stevens’ day hotels by this name in Lille and Vence; Stevens no doubt uses the name generically, as one suitable to a honeymoon hotel. Later, in “Arcades of Philadelphia the Past,” he puts Parisian arcades into his American town. His early reading in French poetry (see *Souvenirs and Prophecies, passim*) pervades his poems to the end. “French and English,” as he says in his “Adagia,” “constitute a single language” (OP 202).

⁵The spiders of “Arcades” correspond to the worms of “The Worms at Heaven’s Gate,” the poem following “Last Looks at the Lilacs.” In this reverse blazon, the lost ingénue (here given the Arabian Nights’ name of Badroulbador) is transported piece

by piece, in the bellies of the worms, from the tomb, and brought to the place where the Shakespearean lark sings. It is a poem of vengeance on the deceptions of romantic love, a comically vicious description of the artist-lover's sublimation, piece by piece, of the beloved's body.

⁶The word we would expect to find, one used elsewhere by Stevens, is "poverty." But "poverty" is a concept, and "poorness" is a quality, as we are made to realize when the unexpected word "poorness" makes us examine its difference from the conventionally used "poverty." The richness of "poorness" can be seen by examining its meanings as listed by OED. The first, listed as obsolete, is "'want of wealth or possessions; indigence' (now replaced by POVERTY)." The others are, in succession: "Deficiency in some good constituent; unproductiveness; leanness or want of vigour caused by ill feeding; thinness, scantiness, insufficiency. Deficiency in some desirable quality; smallness of worth; inferiority, paltriness, meanness. Want of spirit or courage; paltriness or meanness of character or conduct." Stevens' "poorness," which stems from sexual rejection and describes the absence of an emotional life in the present, partakes of all these qualities, both material and characterological. I imagine Stevens scanning the OED after thinking of it and being pleased with what he found.

⁷Here is what Bart Eeckhout says:

The reason that Vendler interprets the poem's syntax as unequivocally as she does is that she wants "The Motive for Metaphor" to corroborate a teleological narrative according to which Stevens passes from an embryonic stage in *Harmonium* through a more complex but not yet fully realized middle period (evidenced by "The Motive for Metaphor"), to the final culmination of his late work, where extremes of complexity and awareness are reached. (248, n 39)

I do not believe I have ever referred to the stage of Stevens' writing in *Harmonium* as "embryonic." To the contrary: Stevens was never more sophisticated, "aware," and "complex" than he was in certain poems in *Harmonium*. To point out change, and continuous self-revision, is not to point out a "teleological" advance in "complexity" and "awareness." However, the issues of old age are not those of youth or middle age; and Stevens' awareness of new issues in his life and culture, with a consequent opening up of such issues in language and structure, is one of the features of his poetry.

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Poets of Life and the Imagination: Wallace Stevens and Chick Austin

EUGENE R. GADDIS

HARTFORD IS FORTUNATE to claim Wallace Stevens as one of the very greatest figures in its history, an outsider who, for the last four decades of his life, was content to call the city his home. Hartford is also fortunate to claim one of the most innovative art museum directors in America, A. Everett Austin, Jr. This paper is the story of how the lives of two formidable modernists intersected in Hartford: two men with very different personalities who were, in their compulsion for self-expression, their defiant originality, and their devotion to new explorations of beauty and the imagination, very much alike.

On the night of February 6, 1934, the doors of the Avery Memorial, the new wing of Hartford's Wadsworth Atheneum, opened on the first International Style interior in any American museum. This was an architectural



Fig. 1. A. Everett "Chick" Austin, Jr. Photo by George Platt Lynes. 1936. Wadsworth Atheneum Archives.

declaration of modernism by the museum's very up-to-date young director, A. Everett Austin, Jr., known to nearly everyone as "Chick" (Fig. 1). The inner court—because Austin had not gotten his way with the outside of the building—looked more like an exterior to be seen at the Bauhaus School of Design in Dessau, Germany, than the inside of a traditional art museum. It was all sleek white walls, lines at right angles, and light, made to appear even more modern by the audacious placement of a baroque marble sculpture of Venus in a pool in the center of the court. "At once you feel that this space stands for the freedom of the XXth Century," raved the visiting critic from *Art News*, which made the opening of the

Avery its lead story that week (Eglington 3). More than a thousand people had come from Boston, New York, Chicago, London, and Paris to see what Chick Austin had wrought.

Climbing to the third-floor galleries, they arrived at the culmination of the evening: the first comprehensive Picasso exhibition ever held in the United States, with nearly 150 works by the one artist in the world who embodied modern art (see Fig. 2). Against walls painted in white or dark flat colors, Picasso's pictures vibrated with a whole array of hues, subdued in the earlier pink and blue periods, intensely bright in the latest works, such as the *Seated Woman* of 1927, owned by Austin's close friend, the wealthy West Hartford collector James Thrall Soby, who had just been named the museum's Honorary Curator of Modern Art. Nearby were three major works that would later enter the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, which at this time did not own outright a single oil by Picasso. On a standing panel was the *Painter and Model* of 1928, and on a neighboring wall a new picture, brought to America for the first time two weeks earlier, *The Girl Before a Mirror* of 1932, soon to become one of the best-known



Fig. 2. Picasso Exhibition, 1934, showing *The Girl Before a Mirror*. Wadsworth Atheneum Archives.

icons of Picasso's art. Alfred Barr, the founding director of the Museum of Modern Art, who would later acquire it for his own institution, likened it to Gothic stained glass. Next to this was the *Sleeping Woman: The Dreamer*, also from 1932. Farther along, one could see one of the two versions of *Les Trois Masques* of 1921, better known as *The Three Musicians*, which eventually came to the Museum of Modern Art. Along a wall of smaller works



Fig. 3. Picasso Exhibition, 1934, showing *The Old Guitarist*. Wadsworth Atheneum Archives.

was the mysterious and stark *Old Guitarist* of 1903, from the Art Institute of Chicago—misery made manifest in angularity, which one frequent visitor to the show would call “The Man with the Blue Guitar” (see Fig. 3):

The man bent over his guitar,
A shearsman of sorts. The day was green.

They said, “You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are.”

The man replied, “Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar.”

And they said then, “But play, you must,
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,

A tune upon the blue guitar
Of things exactly as they are.” (CP 165)

Many Hartfordites were baffled or even outraged by these works—and indeed, one local matron said disgustedly, as she gestured to a sleek glass case set into a wall, revealing a neatly coiled fire hose: “And they call that art!” (Berkman interview). But the forward-looking were thrilled to be in the very heart of the new. And that included Paul Rosenberg, Picasso’s dealer, who had brought the most recent pictures with him on the *Île de*

France. That night, he turned to Henry McBride, the art critic of the *New York Sun*, and said: "At last, there is one genuinely modern museum in the world" (*New York Sun*, Feb. 10, 1934).¹

As if this onslaught of modernism were not enough, an overstimulated crowd returned the very next evening for the inauguration of the museum's theater, with the first performance of an opera called *Four Saints in Three Acts*, by Gertrude Stein, the most famous cubist in the English language, and Austin's friend, the composer Virgil Thomson (see Fig. 4). It was directed by John Houseman, his first directing assignment; choreographed by Frederick Ashton (later Sir Frederick Ashton of the Royal Ballet, London), making his American professional debut; and featured the first African-American cast in an opera. The fashionable from far beyond Hartford, those who had not been to the opening the night before, had arrived by special railway cars from New York wearing gowns designed for the oc-



Fig. 4. *Four Saints in Three Acts*, Wadsworth Atheneum, 1934. Photo by White Studios, N.Y. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University.

casian. They had come by Rolls-Royce, airplane, and, one newspaper columnist suggested, jeweled pogo stick (Beebe 168). After looking at the Picasso show, they descended into the theater, located directly under the central court. It was an intimate Art Deco creation, also designed by Chick Austin, in exotic woods, from the curved walls of West African bubinga in the lobby to the Brazilian rosewood of the proscenium arch. Among the audience that night, one could see, in the fifth row on the aisle, Chick Austin, a gardenia in his lapel, leaning over his left shoulder to chat with his friend Kirk Askew; Buckminster Fuller, who had arrived in his

Dymaxion car with sculptor Isamu Noguchi and Clare Booth (soon to be Luce); Alfred Barr; Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr.; and Alexander Calder. Also to be seen entering the theater was the tall, heavy-set, and somewhat intimidating form of a prominent insurance executive, whom some knew to be a modern poet of stature, Wallace Stevens.

When the curtain went up on reclusive New York painter Florine Stettheimer's pink, blue, and green cellophane sets, these are the first words they heard:

To know to know to love her so.
Four Saints prepare for saints.
It makes it well fish.
Four saints it makes it well fish.
Four Saints prepare for saints it makes it well well fish
It makes it well fish prepare for saints. (15)

The set looked like a baroque Easter egg. The black singers were swathed in satins and silks, gold and silver lamé. Virgil Thomson's music turned out to be an enchanting mélange of Baptist hymn tunes and not a little whiff of Sir Arthur Sullivan along with the haunting, quirky reverberations of Erik Satie. Stein's libretto, immediately famous for such phrases as "Pigeons on the grass alas" (46), seemed to be full of word play and intentional humor, although the meaning was inscrutable to most listeners. Indeed, even Thomson admitted that he did not understand much of the text. But carried along by the music, the words did suggest a series of images and abstract meanings that listeners could interpret—or not—as they wished.

By the first intermission, Chick Austin's contemporaries were ecstatic. According to New York newspaper commentator Lucius Beebe, aesthetic young men such as Julien Levy, who had opened the principal surrealist gallery in New York, and Kirk Askew, who traded in Old Masters at the New York branch of Durlacher Brothers, wept for beauty in corners, saying that they "didn't know anything so beautiful could be done in America" (Beebe 169). At the very end, half an hour of cheering erupted. Chick was propelled onto the stage, and his friend Henry-Russell Hitchcock, later to be regarded as America's foremost architectural historian, ran up and down the aisles, tearing his collar, bashing his top hat, and screaming "Bravo! Bravo!" (Houseman lecture). Chick told the press that the opera "was beautiful beyond my wildest hope" (*Hartford Courant*, Feb. 11, 1934) and was quoted by Virgil Thomson as describing *Four Saints* as "an opera about a group of people who loved one another very much" (Thomson's inscription in a copy of Stein's *Four Saints* in the Wadsworth Atheneum Archives). The young modernists had an extended and intimate family.

Wallace Stevens tempered his judgment. Five days after the opening, in a letter to Harriet Monroe, the editor of *Poetry Magazine*, he wrote:

I reached Hartford in time for the opening performance of Gertrude Stein's opera. While this is an elaborate bit of perversity in every respect: text, settings, choreography, it is most agreeable musically, so that, if one excludes aesthetic self-consciousness from one's attitude, the opera immediately becomes a delicate and joyous work all round.

There were, however, numerous asses of the first water in the audience. New York sent a train load of people of this sort to Hartford: people who walked round with cigarette holders a foot long, and so on. (L 267)

Judging from the original records, showing the seating list for blocks of tickets, with pages of notations, "NY, NY, NY," the word "numerous" (if not "asses") was quite correct.

Although this abruptly honest, cerebral, and methodical man of fifty-four had no patience for what seemed to him the artificiality of gushing sophisticates in their twenties and thirties, and although he disliked the fantasy and preciousness of the sets and costumes, to say nothing of the dances, which he might have regarded as obscene, he had concluded, as did most of the audience, that the thing worked as theater. And it did. It went on to Broadway, where it had the longest run of any American opera until Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* (with the same Eva Jessye choir) was produced the following year.

Stevens was a member of the organization that had produced the opera "The Friends and Enemies of Modern Music." This was a musical subscription society founded by Austin in 1928, which sponsored premieres or early performances of advanced music by composers ranging from Stravinsky and Satie to Poulenc, Milhaud, Schoenberg, and Charles Ives. In the 1930s, Austin, always a champion of the new, told a Hartford audience that he listened to contemporary music so that, if nothing else, he would not "feel like one of the three little pigs in the presence of the big bad wolf" (Austin, "Introduction"). Stevens, too, felt a need to establish, as he later put it, "one's relation to contemporary ideas" (L 340)—particularly through the arts. By the time he saw *Four Saints in Three Acts*, it was a need that stretched back over many years.

Born on October 2, 1879, in Reading, Pennsylvania, Stevens was the son of Garrett Barcalow Stevens, a lawyer, and Margaretha Catherine Stevens, a school teacher. He was the second of five children. He was proud of his descent from the Dutch settlers of New York, to whom he attributed, as he later told his daughter Holly, his stubborn and taciturn nature. After receiving a classical education at Reading Boys High School, he entered Harvard in 1897 as a special student, shortly before his eighteenth birthday. There his literary abilities in both prose and poetry flourished, and he became president of the *Harvard Advocate*. Leaving Harvard without a degree in 1900, he plunged into the great bustling world of New

York City, where he worked briefly as a reporter for the *Tribune* and then attended New York Law School, graduating in 1903. After practicing law in several New York law firms, he began developing an expertise in surety bonds for insurance companies in the city, and, thus established, married, in September of 1909, when he was nearly thirty, the beautiful Elsie Kachel of Reading, Pennsylvania, whom he had known for five years. Although Stevens was by nature solitary, his letters to her, as well as his diaries, during that early period reveal a young man obviously in love, of vast curiosity, a voracious reader in the whole range of literature and history, who would often return to his apartment at the end of the day and memorize a Shakespeare sonnet out of sheer intellectual exuberance. A journal entry in 1905, with its reference to Coleridge's famous lines, gives evidence of a romantic streak in Stevens at twenty-five:

If I were to have my will I should live with many spirits,
wandering by

“caverns measureless to man,
Down to a sunless sea.”

I should live with Mary Stuart, Marie Antoinette, George Sand,
Carlyle, Sappho, Lincoln, Plato, Hawthorne, Goethe and the
like. I am too languid even to name them. (L 82)

As is well known, these romantic inner spirits were transmuted by the New York Armory Show of 1913 and its aftermath, when Stevens' fellow literary luminary from his Harvard days, Walter Arensberg, a wealthy collector, moved to Manhattan with his wife in order to be at the American center of advanced artistic manifestations. In this the Arensbergs were influenced by the painter and art critic Walter Pach, who had helped create the Armory Show. Beginning in 1915, Stevens was a frequent visitor at the literary and artistic salon that the Arensbergs established in their apartment, where the conversation was generally conducted in the French that Stevens loved and knew well and where works by Cézanne, Picasso, Picabia, Braque, and Matisse competed for attention with Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*. Stevens modestly told Elsie that he “made very little out of” Duchamp's works, which was natural, he said, because “without sophistication in that direction, and with only a very rudimentary feeling about art, I expect little of myself” (L 185). But after only a few years in this atmosphere, “sophistication in that direction,” well beyond cubism, would become a lifelong pursuit that would have a profound influence on his poetry.

In 1916, Stevens accepted an attractive offer from the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company and moved to the capital of Connecticut, which in those days was one of the most beautiful and prosperous cities in the Northeast. But after sixteen years in Manhattan, Stevens felt the lack of stimulation from the city's vast cultural resources acutely: “I miss New-York abominably,” he wrote to a friend (Brazeau 10). He also recorded

that his wife “with murderous indifference, pretends that Hartford is sweet to her spirit.” Photographs show her in the city’s Elizabeth Park, enjoying the simple pleasures (Brazeau 10).

Stevens’ continuous writing of poetry sustained him spiritually at this time and indeed, just after arriving in Hartford, he won his first literary prize—\$100 from the Players’ Producing Company of Chicago for a play called *Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise*. Four years later, in 1921, *Poetry Magazine* awarded him its Helen Haire Levinson Prize for his “Pecksniffiana,” and in 1923, Alfred A. Knopf published his first great work, *Harmonium*. The following year, after fifteen years of marriage, a daughter was born to Wallace and Elsie Stevens: Holly Bright Stevens. She was a beautiful child, blond, with large intelligent blue eyes, noticeable even in early photographs. She grew only more beautiful, and Stevens, who was nearly forty-five when she was born, loved such beauty, although it was hard for the shy, aging intellectual to relate to a child. The event was a monumental change in his and Elsie’s lives and may have been responsible for the fact that Stevens ceased literary activity for six years. Another monumental event for him, although he could not have known it at the time, occurred on October 15, 1927, when a twenty-six-year-old named A. Everett Austin, Jr., arrived in Hartford to take up his first full-time job as director of the Wadsworth Atheneum.

Unlike Stevens, Chick Austin had a privileged childhood in which he was the center of attention. He was born on December 18, 1900, in Brookline, Massachusetts, to Laura Etnier Austin, a well-educated farm girl from central Pennsylvania who inherited money from a rich uncle, went on a grand tour of Europe in 1896, and captured an unsuspecting widower from the Tufts University Medical School Faculty, Dr. Arthur Everett Austin, who happened to be studying in Berlin at the time. Laura was a force of nature who arranged frequent extended trips to Europe so that her boy would experience the glories of European culture through visits to churches, palaces, and museums. In 1904, Everett was introduced to palaces, churches, and museums when the family went to Vienna. In 1909, it was Dresden, where the boy went to school, learned German, and began making miniature theater sets. The next year he went to school in Paris, where he learned French and entertained his classmates as Professor Marvel with his first magic shows. At a summer school in Switzerland when he was twelve, he took up painting. By this time, with Laura’s money, the Austins had acquired a grand post-Civil War townhouse in Boston’s Back Bay; a hundred-acre estate in Windham, New Hampshire; and a substantial summer cottage on Harpswell, Maine. Meanwhile, Laura’s mad genealogical research led to her conclusion that she and her boy were descended from Scottish chieftains, Norse Kings, French nobility, and at least one errant pope (Gaddis 22–23, 41).

Chick was sent to the exclusive Noble and Greenough School, went on to Harvard, in the Class of 1922, where he majored in Fine Arts, discov-

ered cigarettes, cocktails, debutante balls, and nights on the town. His professor of painting and drawing, Arthur Pope, a friend and Harvard classmate of Stevens, was the first faculty member to see promise in the boy, defending him to a frequently skeptical administration. In 1922, having excelled in the study of Egyptian art and history with Professor George Reisner, America's leading Egyptologist, Chick was invited to join an expedition to the Egypt and the Sudan as Reisner's special assistant. Mama came along. Before returning to Harvard, he traveled throughout Europe with his mother, and in Paris he met up with another of his teachers, Paul Sachs, Associate Director of the Harvard's Fogg Art Museum, who invited him to attend a performance of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes for the first time, where he saw two works by Igor Stravinsky: *Pulchinelletta*, with décor by Picasso, and *Les Noces*, with a set by Natalia Goncharova. The experience led him to a new vision of the arts that underlay all that he would do as a champion of contemporary art and one of the first to introduce all the arts into an art museum. As he later explained, from that evening "through those summers when every year I went to London for two or three weeks of ballet, every season brought to me the joy of experiencing new artistic forms." Seeing the Russian Ballet, he said, "with its music by modern composers, its scenery by contemporary painters, and its choreography by such great and rare masters as Fokine, Nijinsky, Massine, Nijinska, and Balanchine, has been the most intense emotional experience of my life" (*Hartford Courant*, Nov. 21, 1934).

Back at Harvard in 1924, he finished his degree, and for the next three years was assistant to Edward Forbes, Director of the Fogg, in teaching his famous course in connoisseurship, "Methods and Processes of Italian Painting." During that time, he studied in Siena with one of Italy's greatest fabricators of hitherto unknown Renaissance paintings and learned his fourth language. He was the center of a circle of young Harvard modernists, most of whom would be in the audience with Stevens at the premiere of *Four Saints*. Austin proved to have such an acute eye for artistic quality that in 1927, when the trustees of the Wadsworth Atheneum asked Forbes to suggest a man to become the first professionally trained director of the Hartford museum, Austin was the first choice of both Edward Forbes and Paul Sachs.

When Austin arrived in Hartford in 1927, the Atheneum, as Stevens would have seen it up to that time, was known for American history paintings, Hudson River School pictures, and the Wallace Nutting collection of Colonial furniture and European decorative objects from Pierpont Morgan's collection. With almost manic energy, Austin proceeded to transform America's oldest public art museum into its most innovative. Despite his instinctive modernism, during seventeen years as director, Austin spent much more of the museum's resources on creating the European old master paintings collection and presenting comprehensive exhibitions spanning centuries than he did on contemporary art and exhibitions.

His acquisitions and presentations of modern art, however, were frequent and outstanding even when they were on a modest scale. Inspired by his memories of the Ballets Russes and his own wide-ranging taste, he believed every art form, if it had quality, to be worthy of the art museum, and so he led the way in introducing music, photography, film, dance, and theater into the American museum world. At the same time, Austin not only acted as the education department of the museum, lecturing continuously on a whole range of subjects, but he also founded the art history department at Trinity College, teaching generations of students throughout his tenure as director of the museum.

Six months after arriving, he jarred Hartford by combining the museum's first ball, an eighteenth-century party, "The Venetian Fête," with an exhibition entitled *Modern French Paintings*, introducing the costumed and bewigged guests to a survey of art from Cézanne (a god to all modernists, including Stevens) to Gauguin, van Gogh, Braque, Matisse, and Picasso. A month later, Austin presented Walter Pach, who had been so influential for Arensberg and Stevens during the previous decade, in a lecture entitled "Classic Elements of Modern Art." Pach asserted that the true modern artist "expresses the especial pulse or thrill of his life or time" (*Hartford Courant*, May 4, 1928). This, coupled with Austin's show, produced a letter to the editor of the *Hartford Courant* declaring, "Modern art with its deformity is utterly ridiculous and an insult to the public" (*Hartford Courant*, May 11, 1928). Austin anticipated such sentiments in his own public lecture, asking his audience to look at a painting by stripping it of "its sentimentality, and judge its basic beauty. Just because a landscape happens to remind a young lady of the place she used to stroll with her fiancé, that does not give her the right to assume that the picture is a work of art" (*Hartford Courant*, May 11, 1928). This was one of the first of his many exhortations of the Hartford public to look at art as he did, with a discerning eye, an activity that would open their minds to a wider appreciation of different kinds of beauty, both old and new—even if modern art seemed strange and difficult. For Austin, like Stevens, the deepening of taste and imagination was a moral duty in the face of an increasingly materialistic and superficial culture.

At the end of November 1928, Austin produced a small, accessible, but no less serious exhibition of modern art, the first solo museum exhibition devoted to Edward Hopper, inspired by Austin's purchase of *Captain Stroud's House* for the museum. As no mean watercolorist himself, he appreciated Hopper's brilliant composition and the mysterious atmosphere with which he infused his work. These qualities would have appealed to Stevens, who despite his fascination with cubism, generally chose to live with somewhat more representational, albeit modern, pictures.

Meanwhile, Austin wooed Helen Goodwin, niece of the president of the museum, Charles Goodwin, married her in Paris in 1929, and in 1930 built a house on Scarborough Street, modeled on a Venetian villa, so pro-

vocative that the neighbors called it “the pasteboard palace.” Austin’s flair and eclecticism were seen on the inside as well, with rococo décor on the first floor and the very latest Bauhaus-inspired design on the second floor in Helen Austin’s dressing room—one of the most modern domestic interiors in America at the time. Here they raised their two children, David and Sally, born in 1933 and 1935.

By contrast, in 1932, Wallace and Elsie Stevens bought an outwardly conventional house two blocks west of Scarborough Street, at 118 West-erly Terrace—all very appropriate for a prosperous insurance executive with a wife and child. Although Chick and Helen loved to entertain large groups of friends from every corner of the international art world, Wallace and Elsie lived a rather reclusive life, preferring to tend to their exuberant flower garden.

Yet different as they were, Stevens knew and admired Chick Austin—always at a slight distance—and as the 1930s began, was a frequent visitor and modest contributor to the museum. He could now count on seeing important contemporary art simply by walking a few blocks down Asylum to Main Street, instead of having to go to New York for any glimpse of modern paintings. He usually went there at lunchtime, spoke to no one, and walked quietly through the galleries. James Soby, who worked closely with Chick Austin on his contemporary shows during those years and who frequently lent his growing and spectacular collection of modern art to the museum, recounted how he, sometimes with Austin, would discreetly follow Stevens and see how long he stopped in front of certain works in order to find out which ones he liked best (Brazeau 118).

Among the exhibitions Stevens undoubtedly saw there during this period were four from the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art, a fore-runner of the Museum of Modern Art: *Buckminster Fuller’s Dymaxion House*; *Modern Mexican Paintings*; *Contemporary German Art*; and *Contemporary German Photography*. In 1931, Austin presented the lyrical and more representational side of art in Paris with the first exhibition in America of the Neo-Romantics, who included Kristians Tonny, who later painted the murals on the walls of the museum’s Avery Theater. At that time, Austin made the museum’s first purchase of a modern oil, Pierre Roy’s *Electrification of the Country*, a beautifully drawn and composed fantasy, surreal in all but name, which Chick called “crystallized poetry” (Austin, unpublished text). Austin was using the concept of poetry exactly as Stevens used it in his famous lecture at the Museum of Modern Art twenty years later: “There is a universal poetry,” he declared, “that is reflected in everything” (NA 160).

Later that year, Austin presented *Newer Super-Realism*, the first exhibition of surrealism in any museum, in which Salvador Dalí’s freshly painted *Persistence of Memory* was shown for the first time in America (see Fig. 5). Here was a work that attained iconic status almost instantly. The other surrealists were represented in the show—Miro, de Chirico, Max Ernst, Picasso—but it was Dalí’s Freudian dreamscapes that caught hold of popu-

lar consciousness in Hartford for the first time in America. "Spectators who know their Freud, or who have subtle understandings," said the *Courant*, "will find much to be shocked at in these pictures" (*Hartford Courant*, Nov. 16, 1931). This was the first, but not the last time the *Courant* used the word "shocked" in regard to one of the Atheneum's exhibitions. Austin defended them disarmingly in Hartford's other newspaper: "We do not have to take them too seriously to enjoy them. . . . Many of them are humorous and we can laugh at them. Some of them are sinister and terrifying but so are the Tabloids." He then added—showing that he did take them seriously—that surrealism was

essentially an attempt to exploit, in terms of paint, the more exquisite reality of the imagination, of the dream, even of the nightmare—the desire to push reality beyond the visual actualities of most painting. In it there is much of Freud, of our contemporary interest in the subconscious mind. . . . [T]he artist seeks to create an effect of surprise and astonishment, make breathtaking by the juxtaposition of strange and disparate objects. (*Hartford Times*, Nov. 7, 1931)



Fig. 5. *Newer Super-Realism*, exhibition catalogue, 1931. Wadsworth Atheneum Archives.

Austin, the connoisseur of the *trompe l'oeil* features in baroque art, was entranced by Dali's extraordinary technical skill, his magic realism, as it was later called, as well as his eerie sensuality. Soby remembered that Stevens came several times to this exhibition. One can well understand why, for here, it seemed, was pure imagination translated into paint.

Austin made major purchases of surrealist paintings for the museum. He bought Dali's beautifully simple *Solitude* for \$150 out of the show, later followed by the biographical *Paranoiac Astral Image*, one of Dali's finest earlier works, and then in 1939 acquired the monumental *Apparition of a Face and a Fruit Dish on a Beach*, a tour de force. He also bought the famous Miro *Composition*, Jean Arp's *Objects Placed on Three Planes like Writing*, and Joseph Cornell's *Soap Bubble Set*, the first Cornell to enter a museum. Austin was so keen on surrealism after his exhibition that he painted several works himself, which were shown in a one-man show at the Brummer

Gallery in New York early in 1932. They are very close to that “crystallized poetry” of Pierre Roy. Veering to architecture and abstraction that year, the Atheneum was the second stop for the watershed exhibition of the International Style produced by Chick’s close friends Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson at the Museum of Modern Art, which set the stage for Austin’s battle over the design of the Avery Memorial building.

Then, in 1933, came one of Austin’s most original exhibitions, *Literature and Poetry in Painting Since 1850*, which addressed the question of narrative in painting and which most modernists would have considered heresy. Austin himself had said earlier: “A painting must not tell a story. That is the role of literature, and painting should not be content with imitation. A work of art must give you more than nature” (*Hartford Courant*, Nov. 21, 1930). But here were famous narrative works check-by-jowl with surrealists and abstract artists. Jean-Léon Gérôme’s *l’Eminence Grise*, looking like a Hollywood set from *The Three Musketeers*, was hung beside Dali’s *Persistence of Memory*, which Chick had borrowed again, next to a Kandinsky that Stevens might have likened to music. Was it a coincidence that Stevens began writing again in 1930 as all these exhibitions appeared before his eyes? In 1931, Alfred Knopf published an expanded *Harmonium*, and five years later Stevens would receive *The Nation*’s Poetry Prize for “The Men that Are Falling.”

Then came the Picasso show of 1934. “The Man with the Blue Guitar” was published three years later. In the 1950s, Stevens told his Italian translator Renato Poggioli that the poem is not about any particular painting by Picasso (L 786). Yet he did not mean that seeing the work had not been an inspiration; instead, it was an image to play on his own blue guitar, that is, the imagination. Through it, he could explore for himself the nature of poetry, the intersection of reality and imagination, the intersection of life and art. It is clear that Stevens the artist identifies with Picasso the hero-artist and indeed with all serious artists. Stevens asks, famously, if “this picture of Picasso’s, this ‘hoard / Of destructions,’ ” referring to the artist’s definition of a painting, is “a picture of ourselves” (CP 173). When he states, “Poetry is the subject of the poem” (CP 176), he expresses what Austin and so many modernists had said: a work of art is a work of art and need not be realistic at all. When Gertrude Stein accepted Austin’s invitation to speak in his theater in 1935 on “Pictures and What They Are,” she declared, definitively: “The difference between a painting and the thing painted, is nobody’s business” (Stein, *Lectures* 79).

Chick brought Hartford the ultimate in nonrepresentational art late in 1935 with his *Abstract Art* exhibition—the installation could have been from the twenty-first century—for it featured *Composition in Blue and White* by Piet Mondrian, the first Mondrian purchased by an American museum (see Fig. 6). It cost \$399. Here was the opposite end of the spectrum from surrealism—the cool, calm, Apollonian balance instead of the lurid whirl of Dali’s Dionysian dreams. Austin and Soby would have kept an eye out

for Stevens when he slipped in to see the show. This image could not have been absent from his mind when he wrote "It Must Be Abstract" as a subtitle in his "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" of 1942, a watershed in his literary career. Not all modernists could absorb both surrealism and abstraction, but Austin and Stevens could.

A year later, Austin truly warmed Stevens' heart, when he presented forty works by the poet's favorite artist, Paul Klee. Austin, too, had been greatly taken by Klee and purchased two extremely fine watercolors on a trip to Berlin in 1932, the frighteningly humorous *Mr. Pep and His Horse* and the exquisitely delicate *Marionettes in a Storm*. Helen Austin once recalled that her aunt, the wife of the Atheneum's president, said at the time, "You know how your Uncle Charlie loathes the modern art Chick buys. This Klee fellow is really the living end" (Coleman Casey). Austin and Stevens would have said: "He is a poet."



Fig. 6. Abstract Art Exhibition, 1935. Wadsworth Atheneum Archives.

There is not time to speak of music—another interest that Austin and Stevens shared—and the many presentations of the Friends and Enemies, but Austin's most ambitious program, the Hartford Festival of 1936, which opened just after the Klee exhibition, should be mentioned, as it included in one night *Les Noces* by Igor Stravinsky, the American premiere of Erik Satie's *Socrate* with a mobile set by Calder, and the world premiere of a specially commissioned ballet by George Balanchine, whom Chick had helped bring to America with Lincoln Kirstein three years earlier. It was *Serenata*, called *Magic* for the evening in honor of Chick. For among his many other talents, Chick was a performer; and in 1932, in the depths of



Fig. 7. Paul Klee, *Mr. Pep and His Horse* (detail), 1925. Black ink and watercolor on paper. Wadsworth Atheneum. Gift of James Junius J. Goodwin Fund, 1933.

In those classes in the early 1930s, enrolled by her father, was Holly Stevens. Holly was often a lonely and unhappy child. Isolated by her parents, she was all too aware of a tense and difficult atmosphere at home, the result of her mother's depression and the distance of her shy and cerebral father. From childhood through her graduation from the Oxford School in 1941, she found the perfect sanctuary from Westerly Terrace, the most glamorous pied piper of them all. He was indeed "The Great Osram," who transported her to a haven of beauty and imagination at the Wadsworth Atheneum. She was often in Chick's studio down the street, helping with props and costumes, as well as in the museum's theater, building and painting sets, passing out programs, and, in 1940, appearing on stage as a lady of the court when Chick produced, designed, and starred in *Hamlet* (see Figs. 8 and 9). He knew that this was an amateur production, but as he told the press, that was not the point: "No matter how often it is repeated, or perhaps how badly played, there is always something new that gets across to the audience. Even though the undertaking may turn out to be over-ambitious, it is better than if the attempt had not been made at all" (*Hartford Courant*, Jan. 10, 1941). Stevens, who was rhapsodic about Shakespeare, calling his works "plays of incomparable enhancement" (NA 165), probably would have agreed. Chick Austin's design for Holly's costume is in the Atheneum's collection. The blond hair and the characteristically large eyes are unmistakable.

Several years before she died, Holly sent me a note, explaining what Austin had meant to her and to her father:

Surrogate father, lover, real confidante and friend: A. Everett Austin, Jr. We were both from families with one parent dominant, in both cases the parent of the opposite sex. Neither of us had a "happy" personal life, over all. Could that be why, in a sense, we bonded? . . . Respect and imagination were common



Fig. 8. Costume design by Chick Austin for Holly Stevens as a lady of the court in *Hamlet*, 1941. Wadsworth Atheneum.



Fig. 9. Chick Austin as Hamlet, 1941. Wadsworth Atheneum Archives.

bonds between my father and AEA [A. Everett Austin]. I know they met, but I do not know where, when, or how often. We were neighbors (only Terry Road separated Westerly Terrace and Scarborough Street), and there was a short-cut through a vacant lot from Terry to Scarborough, but I don't know that they ever walked together although my father often went out for a walk around the block. My father also visited the Wadsworth Atheneum frequently, and was the parent responsible for enrolling me in the children's art classes there in the early 1930s. Thereafter, whenever I was at the museum, or doing something with, or for, AEA, he was not worried about me.

In looking back it was more than that, my father knew that the WA [Wadsworth Atheneum] was a second home for me, and that the people and programs there were stimulating my imagination in ways he wished for me, that would not happen at home, or at school. When I was allowed to travel to Ohio, by myself, at age 15? To stay with Helen Henley, who had been in charge of the art classes at the WA, it was a vote of confidence (not only for her, or for me) but for AEA who had employed her. The Wadsworth Atheneum, under Austin's direction, was an exciting and provocative environment. It was where I grew up. (Holly Stevens to Eugene R. Gaddis, April 20, 1990)

In 1944, Austin was asked to resign from the Atheneum. His taste for advanced art and his theatrical activities had not pleased the trustees. Holly Stevens was married to John Hanchak the same year. In 1946, Austin became the first director of the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, Florida, which he transformed into a vibrant art institution. During his final decade, he divided his time among that museum; his house in Hartford; his mother's former estate in Windham, New Hampshire, where he started a summer theater; and a villa in the south of France. He died of lung cancer in Hartford Hospital on March 29, 1957, at the age of 56, still director of the Ringling. The editor of *Art News*, who had known the leaders of American museums for thirty years, said: "A. Everett Austin, Jr. was perhaps the most creative and original of art museum directors since such institutions came into being" (*Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, March 31, 1957). Wallace Stevens, who died of stomach cancer two years earlier in St. Francis Hospital, at the age of 75, had been honored with every major poetry award, the most prestigious honorary degrees, and the Pulitzer Prize for poetry.

These two men, seemingly worlds apart on the surface, shared exactly the same passionate conviction that art at the highest level ennoble the human spirit. As early as 1929, Austin told the public: "In a civilization such as we live in, which does everything in its power to dull personal esthetic judgments . . . a stimulation of such powers becomes artistically necessary. But unfortunately, significant art, which mirrors for all time the essence of the culture which produced it, is often cast aside for the trivial, the pretty, and the insignificant" (*Hartford Times*, Nov. 30, 1929). Ten years later Stevens wrote to his friend Henry Church: "My own way out toward the future involves a confidence in the spiritual role of the poet, who will somehow have to assist the painter, etc. (any artist, to tell the truth) in restoring to the imagination what it is losing at such a catastrophic pace, and in supporting what it has gained" (L 340). In 1942, just after Pearl Harbor, fearing that the arts were in danger of being pushed aside during the widening war, Austin told his trustees: "The record of the great culture of Western civilization must not be imperiled. . . ." The museum, he said, must act "as the vigilant guardian of the spirit—for it will not really be the guns and ships, important as they are, that will eventually conquer, but the spirit which animates them" (Austin, "Annual Report"). In his address at the Museum of Modern Art in 1951, Stevens declared, "It would be tragic not to realize the extent of man's dependence on the arts" (NA 175).

One of the twentieth century's most astute cultural impresarios, Lincoln Kirstein, once described Chick Austin as a "poet of life and imagination" (Kirstein to Gaddis, Nov. 5, 1982). It is fair to say that both Wallace Stevens and Chick Austin understood that great works of art were in essence great poetry. Given their efforts to communicate this overriding con-

viction to their respective audiences, it can be said that both Austin and Stevens, each in his own medium, were poets of life and imagination.

Wadsworth Atheneum
Hartford, Conn.

Notes

¹Newspaper articles cited in the text are from the collection of newspaper scrapbooks in the Wadsworth Atheneum Archives.

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“He mutter spiffy”: A [Lawyer’s] Response to Berryman’s Dream Song 219, “So Long? Stevens”

KATHRYN MUDGETT

IN “SO LONG? STEVENS,” John Berryman, through his singer Henry, found Wallace Stevens a “grandee crow,” a “funny money-man” whose “metaphysics / he hefted up until we could not breathe / the physics” (2–3, 13–15).¹ Helen Vendler has called Berryman’s Dream Song 219 “the best short brief against Stevens” (76). Berryman, of course, is not the only person who has “indicted” Stevens for his spiffy muttering—his poetic works uttered, allegedly, smartly but indistinctly. In a review of *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, William Pritchard damns Stevens with faint praise, partly, it seems, for the poet’s failure to write with the clarity and humanity of Robert Frost, “the most satisfying and life-changing” poet of the twentieth century according to Pritchard (L2). In the review, Pritchard recounts a story told by Frost in which Frost recalls an exchange with Stevens: “ ‘Once [Stevens] said to me, “You write on subjects.” And I said, “You write on bric-a-brac’ ” (L1).

I propose to offer a brief in opposition to Berryman’s poetic critique and to his and other critics’ notion of Stevens’ opacity, as well as their devaluation of Stevens to second-tier status as a creator of bric-a-brac, mere diversionary baubles. Vendler has discussed the distinction between “first-order” poetry and “second-order” poetry, finding Stevens’ work more often taking the form of the latter, that is, poetry enacting “the thinking of thoughts, or the sensing of sensations, or the supposing of suppositions” rather than narrating a first-person experience (75–76). Vendler, a worthy champion of Stevens, does not equate second-order poetry with second-tier work. The fault lies not with the poet, but with the reader who finds Stevens “remote, enigmatic, indecipherable, even inhuman” because the reader, unlike Stevens, is incapable of the “[p]rofound feeling, sustained intelligence, whimsical self-derision, and . . . discipline of aesthetic outline coexist[ing] in Stevens” (Vendler 77).

As both a lawyer and lover of Stevens’ work, I offer an amicus brief to the court of opinion in the case of John Berryman versus Wallace Stevens. In the brief, I will examine and challenge Berryman’s indictment of (and begrudging bow to) Stevens’ poetry in “So Long? Stevens.” Two fellow lawyers will join me on brief: Stevens himself, who presciently responded

to Berryman's Dream Song 219 in his late poem "As You Leave the Room" (c. 1947–55) long before Henry raised his voice in song; and Oliver Wendell Holmes, who wrote eloquently of the workings of the legal mind in "The Path of the Law."

The title of Berryman's poetic "counter-mutter" questions both the longevity of Stevens' artistic reputation and Henry's opinion of its impending demise by stating "So Long? Stevens" in the interrogative. Berryman's first image of the poet plants Stevens squarely in the realm of business, not law or art: "He lifted up, among the actuaries, / a grandee crow. Ah ha & he crowed good. / That funny money-man" (1–3). Categorized with statisticians of risk, Stevens is likened to them in their black-suited uniformity, yet he is distinguished from them in his ability to "mutter spiffy" in language that in Berryman's eyes is more dandified and evanescent than eloquent and "wound[ing]" (5, 11). In describing Stevens as an actuarial money-maker, Berryman suggests that Stevens' workaday job settling surety claims was not only lucrative but narrowly technical, requiring little imaginative thought, and that this may somehow explain Stevens' obscure and off-putting language. For Berryman, Stevens, as a technician of both surety bonds and words, has the capacity to impress but not to move: "What was it missing, then, at the man's heart / so that he does not wound?" (10–11). As portrayed by Berryman, Stevens is reminiscent of the nameless Wall Street attorney in Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener," one of "those unambitious lawyers who never addresses a jury, or in any way draws down public applause; but in the cool tranquillity of a snug retreat, do a snug business among rich men's bonds and mortgages and title-deeds" (14). To Berryman, he is a man of papers, not of flesh and blood. Stevens himself, in the prose piece "Surety and Fidelity Claims" (1938), describes how a man whose business is claims can become so consumed by paperwork that "he finds it difficult sometimes to distinguish himself from the papers he handles," so that "he and his papers constitute a single creature, consisting principally of hands and eyes: lots of hands and lots of eyes" (*OP* 239).

Although Berryman reduces Stevens to a mechanical if masterful technician, Stevens emphasizes the "human interest in the handling of claims," the centrality of "the claim man himself" in the flesh (*OP* 239). And Stevens, unlike Berryman, saw his life as a lawyer—not simply an insurance claim man—intertwined with his life as a poet, the two spheres of law and poetry neither separate nor incompatible. Berryman does not even acknowledge Stevens' legal training in his poem, yet that education in law is an element of Stevens' being that accounts, in part, for the "flourishing art" (7) Berryman concedes is his. (Even this compliment takes the form of complaint, as Berryman's Henry finds "a odd / . . . something . . . something . . . not there" in verses that thrive in mere luxuriant form rather than fecund substance [6–7].) Stevens saw his poetic life and legal vocation as parts of an organic whole: "one is not a lawyer one minute and a

poet the next" (L 413). He disputed the "caricature in people's minds . . . [of] the image of the poet" as "'an idler, a man without clothes, a drunk'" (L 414). For Stevens the contemporary poet was an individual engaged in both the "essential and vital" work of poetry and the contemporary world itself. Replying to a correspondent's comment that people find it difficult to "'reconcile a man of sound logic *** with the exploration of the imagination,'" Stevens rejected the notion that his own life could be so compartmentalized: "I don't have a separate mind for legal work and another for writing poetry. I do each with my whole mind, just as you do everything that you do with your whole mind" (L 414).

As Stevens suggests, we cannot consider him as a poet without acknowledging his legal training, for it is not possible for a person educated in the law *not* to think like a lawyer, to be a person attuned to a particular form of logical reasoning. What does it mean to "think like a lawyer"? Oliver Wendell Holmes provides both an explanation and a possibility for the reconciliation of logical and imaginative thought:

The training of lawyers is a training in logic. The processes of analogy, discrimination, and deduction are those in which they are most at home. . . . And the logical method and form flatter that longing for certainty and for repose which is in every human mind. But certainty is generally an illusion, and repose is not the destiny of man. (465–66)

Stevens understood this human desire for certainty as well as the impossibility of a sure repose. Further, he realized the tension between the human need for clarity, the mind's movement from "the chromatic to the clear, from the unknown to the known" (*OP* 245), and the mind's inability to reach "the true center," that "unapproachable" "middle spot between the polar and the anti-polar," the real and the imaginative life (L 740).

Like Holmes, Stevens rejects the possibility of certainty, nor does he long for certitude. He has "no wish to arrive at a conclusion." Rather, he says,

Sometimes I believe most in the imagination for a long time and then, without reasoning about it, turn to reality and believe in that and that alone. But both of these things project themselves endlessly and I want them to do just that. (L 710)

Stevens has been described as "untroubled by the hobgoblin of consistency" (Bates 10). How do we reconcile this man who acknowledges that certainty is an "illusion" with the lawyer trained in logic? Holmes again gives us a possible answer. In describing the organic development of the law, Holmes delineates a process of "nearly a thousand years, like the development of a plant, each generation taking the inevitable next step,

mind, like matter, simply obeying a law of spontaneous growth" (478). His description could as easily apply to Stevens' poetic growth and change as Stevens negotiates with reality and the imagination to approach but never reach the "true center." This search takes place within Stevens' whole mind, of which the law, "a form of the reason" (L 761), is a part. For Stevens, "we have only our own intelligence on which to rely" when confronted by "the chaos of life" (OP 245). The poet, even the legal logician-poet, operates within the realm of uncertainty in which his poems are "rub-bings of reality," the chromatic results never achieving clarity. Each "image[] of reality" is a "trial," an attempt, at best, to "see clearly." Stevens applied this notion of poems as "delineations" of reality to the work of William Carlos Williams, describing the poet's verse as "the grinding of a glass, the polishing of a lens" (OP 245) that can never be made wholly transparent.

Stevens' pronouncement that these poetic "delineations are trials" is equally applicable to the process undertaken by the lawyer confronting a new case. Stevens says: "There is nothing cut and dried about any of these things; you adapt yourself to each case" (OP 237-38). He refutes the notion that law—the resolution of the case at hand—is any more certain than our confrontations with reality. Law is not a dried-up artifact, black-letter precept entombed in casebooks and treatises. It, like the poet's engagement with reality, is subject to "spontaneous growth" (Holmes 468). Although the law is predictive of the future to some degree in its prophecies of the consequences of human activity, precedent is always subject to "re-consideration upon a slight change in the habit of the public mind" (Holmes 466), or simply the facts of the individual case. Law's corpus is susceptible to evolutionary change. Law cannot be predictive language alone; it must be human, a part of the lives of men.

In his evaluation of his lifelong negotiations with the reality of the universe, Stevens was his own grand inquisitor in "As You Leave the Room," written near the end of his life. An eminence more suited to the task of judgment than Henry, Stevens, in the poem, both interrogates his own poetic oeuvre and foresees Henry's misgivings about his art:

You speak. You say: Today's character is not
A skeleton out of its cabinet. Nor am I. (OP 117)

He is a man of "hands and . . . eyes," not marrowless bone. Anticipating Henry's complaint of Stevens' attention to the metaphysical at the expense of the physical, the poet questions whether he has practiced a form of heresy in evading reality: "I wonder, have I lived a skeleton's life, / As a disbeliever in reality, / A countryman of all the bones in the world?" (OP 117). But in the course of his self-imposed auto-da-fé, Stevens offers a defense, evidence of his engagement with the real: "That poem about the pineapple, the one / About the mind as never satisfied, / The one about

the credible hero, the one / About summer, are not what skeletons think about" (*OP* 117). As proof of a contact with organic life overlooked by Henry, Stevens recalls "Someone Puts a Pineapple Together," in which the poet finds "At last, . . . the pineapple on the table or else / An object the sum of its complications, seen / And unseen. This is everybody's world" (*NA* 87). And he remembers "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War," describing how the man who "Acts in reality, adds nothing / To what he does," the "heroic / Actor and act but not divided" (*CP* 279); and "Credences of Summer," in which the poet rejects dual ruminations on "The physical pine, the metaphysical pine" and sounds the call: "Let's see the very thing and nothing else" (*CP* 373).

If "it sticks / in Henry's throat to judge" a poet he sees as "better than us; less wide" (16–18), Stevens does not hesitate to subject his life's work to cold-eyed scrutiny, his examination ultimately refuting Henry's charge of the narrowness of his poetic reach. If he has been a "countryman of all the bones in the world," shunning the earth at hand to absorb himself in epistemological concerns, he has also been a "Part of a major reality, part of / An appreciation of a reality / And thus an elevation" (*OP* 117–18). In the poet's interplay of reality and the imagination, the "snow [he] had forgotten," that objectivity that allows him to negotiate between the two worlds, brings the universe within the grasp of his mind, elevates it so that he feels "as if [he] left / With something [he] could touch, touch every way" (*OP* 117–18), with hands and eyes as well as intellect. But he is left with a final "as if," in which "nothing has been changed except what is / Unreal, as if nothing had been changed at all" (*OP* 118).

Stevens recognizes that contact with reality is necessarily provisional, as we encounter it and endlessly project ourselves upon it. As Stevens phrases it in a poem's title, "Reality Is an Activity of the Most August Imagination" (emphasis added). The imagination necessary for the task of engaging reality is not the emaciated, skeletal ("less wide") creative force Henry suspects of Stevens, but one described by Holmes as of majestic scope, for which "the most far-reaching form of power" is to connect "with the universe and catch an echo of the infinite, a glimpse of its unfathomable process" (478). Mind and being engage together in a "grinding going round," as "things emerge[] and move[] and [are] dissolved" (*OP* 135–36). There is no certainty of repose. The poet must accept "an insolid billowing of the solid," an "argentine abstraction approaching form / And suddenly denying itself away" (*OP* 136).

Once again, Oliver Wendell Holmes offers guidance in understanding Stevens' creative process. In speaking of his own veneration of the law, Holmes calls it "one of the vastest products of the human mind" (473). So too is the poet's argentine abstraction of the world. The poetic process, like the development of organic law, "has the final title to respect that it exists, that it is not a Hegelian dream, but a part of the lives of men" (Holmes 473). Poetry, as much as law, records the developing history of the human

race. And like law, its prophecies are uncertain, susceptible to change, unfettered by the hobgoblin of consistency. Each answers to the law of spontaneous growth; each requires a mind attuned to both the physical and the metaphysical pine. In the face of uncertainty, Stevens "seethe[s]," "brilliant," "ever-fresh," because he is not bound by the laws of cause and effect, the straitjacket of logic. He is not hampered by Henry's narrow vision of the world, in which the poet's role is simply to "wound, as well as utter / a fact of happy world" (12–13). Stevens' poetic world, as much as his legal world, is a more complex one than that, in which, in Holmes' words, "no concrete proposition is self-evident," and phenomena with which we are confronted cannot "be worked out like mathematics from some general axioms of conduct" (466, 465). His is an activity of the most august imagination, of a mind in evolution, without the safety of the illusion of certitude or the surety of repose.

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Notes

¹ Citations to Berryman's poem refer to line numbers.

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Doty, Deleuze, and “Distance”: The Stevens Intertext

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As the individual affirms the distance, she follows and joins it, passing through all the other individuals implied [therein] . . . and extracts from it a unique Event which is once again herself, or rather the universal freedom.
—Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*

IN THIS PAPER, I CONTINUE the argument elaborated at greater length elsewhere (see “*Going the Distance*”) that American literature has been historically constituted by and around and through what so often can become effaced in foundational appropriations of human experience and of human subjectivity in particular: namely, a constitutive space, at once dark, mysterious, unspeakable, that Joyce Carol Oates in a recent novel characterizes as

“the black hole in the firmament where God used to be . . . [and that, given their] ‘yearnings of infinitude,’ . . . Americans are likely to feel . . . [they] *never grow out of.*” (*Broke Heart Blues* 92)

In a literature as self-referential as America’s, I view this lettered space, moreover, as a radical locus of misrecognition—a space inveterately and omnivorously and indefatigably about the cultural work of *distancing* texts as various as novels, poems, stories, memoirs, even people themselves, from essences, origins, ends, and ultimate truths. In response to the age-old demand to describe what is life and what is death, the ancient female sage in Toni Morrison’s Nobel Prize address a decade ago, we notice, is guardedly silent: “she does not [answer]; she keeps her secret; her good opinion of herself; her gnomic pronouncements; her art without commitment. She *keeps her distance*, enforces it and retreats into the singularity of isolation, in sophisticated, privileged space” (5; emphasis added).

Let me suggest even further that the “sophisticated, privileged space,” in Morrison’s own words here, that opens up between the self and the

perennial social demands placed upon that self—the “distance” picked up by Morrison and foregrounded in my title—is a space that has been kept and guarded in American literature for a very long time. “Of what use is genius,” Emerson, for instance, remarks in his essay entitled “Experience,” “if the organ is too convex or too concave, and cannot find a focal distance within the actual horizon of human life?” (474). But closer to our own time, listen to American Lambda Award-winning poet Mark Doty, and one of the featured speakers at this conference, ruminating upon Italian painter Bernardo Bellotto’s *View of the Grand Canal* (ca. 1740) currently housed in the J. Paul Getty Museum. First, from the meditation entitled “Boats” from Doty’s essay entitled *Seeing Venice*:

The infinity of them, in the distance, clustered in the Bacino di San Marco, off along the Riva degli Schiavoni. A welter of vessels, a dense web of rigging . . . At first a meaningless if intricate jumble—and then it never quite seems to stop revealing more and more. So much to be known! Praise for the instrument of the eye. (n.p.)

Then, this excerpt from the following meditation entitled “Masts”:

[Bellotto] shows off; he renders a distance so intricate as to seem inexhaustible. So complicated, visually, that finally we simply have to give up and admire him—our eyes can’t possibly match his, can barely follow these intricate distances in their overlaps and complexities. . . . [W]e’re stunned. There’s more here than we thought, and more than we’ll ever see. (n.p.)

In the American tradition of thought that provides the historical context within which to situate Mark Doty, and Wallace Stevens before him as we shall see, I am emboldened to draw upon the philosophical pragmatism of William James. For as with Doty’s iteration of the “more and more” of worldly experience befaling the human eye, it is William James who is awed by a similar intricacy and complexity in *A Pluralistic Universe* and who thus finds himself “ ‘compelled to give up [on] logic, fairly, squarely, and irrevocably.’ ” James’s complete aversion to logic lies in its exclusionary curtailment of reality, parceling it out, as the logic of exclusion does, to “ ‘real essence’ ” and “ ‘full truth.’ ” Such a tyrannous methodology could only “ ‘defeat[] the end it was used for’ ”—that end, of course, being to come to terms with “ ‘Reality, life, experience, concreteness, immediacy’ ” that we should always find “ ‘exceeds our logic, overflows and surrounds it’ ” (qtd. in Martin 86).

French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, whose own critical investment in American literature is profound and wide-ranging, is vexed by exclusionary thinking to a similar degree. I enlist his theory at this point on behalf

of James, and modern American poetry more generally, for the very reason intuited by Doty previously: the safeguarding of rhetorical distance. For according to Deleuze, “each ‘thing’ opens itself up to [an] infinity of predicates” only when it “loses its center, that is, its identity as concept or self . . . [and instead] traverses the divergent series [of predicates] as divergent and causes [things, therefore] to resonate *through their distance and in their distance*” (*Logic of Sense* 174; emphasis added).

With respect to the loss of identity or self just noted, then, divergence is an important aspect of the predication of experience, underwriting as it does the “pluralism” of James’s universe previously, or at least the perspectivism with which he views it, and thus leads us back, once again, to all those boats and masts in Doty’s response to Bellotti’s painting, or in this next passage from Deleuze, to the superabundance of towns:

towns are linked only by their distance and resonate only through the divergence of their series, their houses and their streets. There is always another town within the town. Each term becomes the means of going all the way to the end of another, [and] by following the entire distance. . . . [D]ivergence is no longer a principle of exclusion, and disjunction no longer a means of separation. Impossibility is now a means of communication. (*Logic of Sense* 174)

On this account, then, contrary to received wisdom, great minds are likely to be “great” not because they think alike, but because they do not. Ultimately, their going the distance allows for the fashioning of perspectives for experience—those that can “displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light” (Adorno 247).

Our insistence, nonetheless, upon forging likenesses between great minds perhaps suggests that another kind of distance may be at work in our response to worldly experience—the kind of distance, in Theodor Adorno’s own meditation on that term, that can function as a “safety-zone” (127), a sort of self-protective mechanism that would stave off the alterity of experience by foundationalizing truth, viewing truth in the terms that James had complained of, as so many embedded essences and sedimented concepts. If playing it safe casts the notion of distance in a somewhat negative light, Deleuze would counter this stratagem in his indispensable *Logic of Sense* with the notion of what he calls “positive distance”: “The idea of a positive distance as distance . . . appears to us essential, since it permits the measuring of contraries through their finite difference instead of equating difference with a measureless contrariety, and contrariety with an identity” (172–73). In “Letter to Walt Whitman” from his most recent collection of poetry entitled *Source*, Mark Doty corroborates the point succinctly: “our theorists / question notions of iden-

tity: Are you who you love, or can you dwell in categorical ambiguity? / Our numbers divide, merge and multiply; / . . . who's to say just who anyone is?" (30–31). Subjectivity, in other words, plays it safe, when it holds off otherness—the “‘chaosmos’ ” or “aleatory point” (176), as Deleuze refers to it in *The Logic of Sense*—and makes truth entirely coincident with itself. Divergence, disjunction, differentiation—distance, in a word—for which nothing less than the image of “the Grand Canyon of the world, the ‘crack’ of the self, and the dismembering of God” (176) seems to suit Deleuze’s purpose, promises something quite other. And just at this juncture between the critical theory of Deleuze and the poetic practice Doty, it is none other than Wallace Stevens who now provides us with the crucial intertext.

From the point of view of the safety zone of logical speculation, there is first of all in Stevens the kind of subjectivity predisposed to hold off otherness—that “crack” in the self just alluded to—in order to make its own truth entirely self-coincident. That would be the kind of indulgent self-representation that greets us in “Wild Ducks, People and Distances,” for instance, where “the final, *fatal* distances” of Stevens’ villagers only serve to show just how resistant they are to “The weather of *other* lives” (*CP* 329; emphases added). On the other hand, in the process of identification that I view characteristically deployed in modernist American poetry, we are more likely to encounter in Stevens the representation overshooting its object to problematize the strict correspondence to external reality and, as a proto-modernist poet such as Emily Dickinson seems to anticipate, to find ourselves well beyond “the Distance / On the look of Death—” and closer to her more daring space of “internal difference, / Where the Meanings, are—” (119, 118).

For Doty, the closeness betokened by such internality suggests something deeply paradoxical about human experience as he remarks continuously throughout another essay wholly inspired by classical painting, *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*: how things “placed right next to us” (or in Dickinson’s case, inside us), “in absolute intimacy,” are at the same time “unknowable” (66). As Doty goes on to observe, “they satisfy so deeply because they offer us intimacy and distance at once, allow us to be both here and gone,” and thus concludes:

Here and gone. That’s what it is to be human, I think—to be both someone and no one at once, to hold a particular identity in the world (our names, our place of origins, our family and affectional ties) and to feel that solid set of ties also capable of dissolution, slipping away, as we become moments of attention. (67)

Or, as Deleuze might gloss the paradox of identity here: “Distance is, at arm’s length, the affirmation of that which it distances” (*Logic of Sense* 173).

In "The Ultimate Poem Is Abstract," Stevens alludes to a "placid space" very much in terms of the alienating intimacy that Doty ascribes to the still life painter's paradoxical abstractions:

It is an intellect
Of windings round and dodges to and fro,

Writhings in wrong obliques and distances,
Not an intellect in which we are fleet: present
Everywhere in space at once, cloud-pole

Of communication. (*CP* 429–30)

The "obliques and distances" in this passage severely cloud or curtail ready access to reality and to transparent communication about that reality and, what is more, to fixing some definitive conception of "This Beautiful World of Ours" "at the middle" of that discursive transmission. As a result, we are left, in the poet's words, rather "Helplessly at the edge" (*CP* 430) of intellectual certainty, much as we are in Stevens' more baffling "Chocorua to Its Neighbor," whose opening lines at least have the virtue of vaguely reminding us of some of the ideas I have just been touching upon:

To speak quietly at such a distance, to speak
And to be heard is to be large in space,
That, like your own, is large, hence, to be part
Of sky, of sea, large earth, large air. It is
To perceive men without reference to their form. (*CP* 296)

Earlier, I spoke of a lettered space in American literature within which we are invited to view the identity of individuals as produced rather than given. Michel Foucault does not identify such a space in the writing of Baudelaire, but he well might have. For it is Baudelaire, according to Foucault, who gives us the clearest conception of our current modernity, as the poet imagines "not the man who goes off to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth," but rather "the man who tries to invent himself," since modernity, in its truest sense, "compels him to face the task of producing himself," that is to say, of "constitut[ing] . . . the self as an autonomous subject" (42). If in such terms a transition may be marked from a premodern, reflecting subject to a more modern, inventing and producing one, is it not possible to imagine this historical shift as occurring between the two kinds of distances rehearsed previously: that is, a shift from a safe ontological distance to one more daringly relativist in character? If this development helps to account for the generally posthumanist treatment of the subject in modernist American literature, it comes as no sur-

prise that a poet such as Stevens would be predisposed to remark such a discursive alteration in much of his earlier writing. "Academic Discourse at Havana" is perhaps exemplary in this regard.

In this majestic text from 1923, Stevens attaches the notion of an ontological distance, which we have come to understand in terms of a beleaguered rhetoric of transcendence and steadfastness, to the passing of an "urgent, competent, serener myth," overblown and outworn in its excess of superlatives: "perfect plenitude," "ripest summer," "hottest bloom," "longest resonance," and so forth (*CP* 143). More specifically, the protective distance is imaged in terms of "an old casino in a park," an excrescent structure that has clearly seen better days:

Life is an old casino in a park.
The bills of the swans are flat upon the ground.
A most desolate wind has chilled Rouge-Fatima
And a grand decadence settles down like cold. (*CP* 142)

Not even the Yeatsean "indolent progressions of the swans" that once warded the waters entailed to the casino can make the age of classicism that it represents "come right" (*CP* 143), so that its boarded windows and leaf-encrusted fountains are there clearly to mark the end of an era.

When Foucault talks about the "attitude" of modernity, he speaks of how the new era is "indissociable from a desperate eagerness to imagine it, to imagine it otherwise than it is, and to transform it" (41). Imagination is powerfully signal to modernity. In the decline that Stevens recounts, however, it is "Politic man" who looks down from the towers of the casino fearfully to pronounce "Imagination as the fateful sin" (*CP* 143). The pronouncement, nevertheless, cannot go unchallenged any longer. Choosing his thoughts carefully—"dark, pacific words" for an "infinite repetition" (*CP* 144)—the poet finally rises to *his* balcony and commences to intone a new myth by the end of the poem:

This may be benediction, sepulcher,
And epitaph. It may, however, be
An incantation that the moon defines
By mere example opulently clear.
And the old casino likewise may define
An infinite incantation of our selves
In the grand decadence of the perished swans. (*CP* 145)

If the poet's concluding dark words are spiring us to a new age off in the moon-like distance, what is perhaps most important to note is that an incantation of plural selves will be at the center of it. The plurality here prevents Stevens from having to say anything categorical about the subjectivity that the poet's new myth will foreground, a myth specifically

allergic to the “world” and to the “word” that might “import a universal pith / To Cuba” (CP 144). Stevens himself, according to Thomas Grey, repeatedly remarked that “the poet must stay open to the flux of experience and unfinished, hence never quite himself,” and in this connection, Grey cites the remark from a letter in Stevens’ final year stating that “ ‘once one is strongly defined, no other definition is ever possible, in spite of daily change’ ” (136–37 n 36). Accordingly, in Stevens’ “Holiday in Reality,” “a common man . . . [does] not exist” (CP 312). And undoubtedly, “The Motive for Metaphor” is driven by the fact that “you yourself were never quite yourself / And did not want nor have to be, / Desiring the exhilarations of changes” (CP 288). What seems to be of overriding importance at the close of the much earlier “Academic Discourse,” therefore, is that the incantation of selves is made “infinite.” Therein lies the demise of the ontology of distance, its benediction and sepulcher and epitaph all rolled up into one.

With the rhetorical shift from an ontological to a more relativist distance in Stevens’ poetry, we are brought more and more before texts such as “The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man” and the “unhandsomeness” of what Stanley Cavell refers to as a more evanescent (i.e., pragmatist) approach to human experience (*Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*). In this later text, life is imaged by Stevens as a “sensual, pearly spouse,” and, as a paradigmatic emblem for human identity constructed within and throughout that life, she remains “fluent in even the wintriest bronze” (CP 222). Raising the problematic of a correspondent reality once again, we are perhaps invited to view this “pearly spouse” as making a strategic intervention somewhere between Mrs. Alfred Uruguay, who first “approached the real” “ ‘in order to get at [her]self’ ” and later finds that self “Rushing from what was real” (CP 249), and Lady Lowzen, “For whom what is was other things” and who therefore “Skims the real for its unreal” (CP 272). Like the sun—“The fire eye in the clouds”—that has continued to remain impervious to, and so survive, an entire wheel of explanatory myths rayed around it through history, so this pearly spouse promises to outlive all the forms of identity she has been (and will be) conceived to signify. The key, however, is “man” himself continuing to remain “ignorant,” that is to say, non-peremptory, non-categorical, non-prescriptive, in his “sleight-ly” unhandsome approach to her. For only then will he gain “any chance to mate his life with life” (CP 222) and thereby prolong and extend it in a variety of articulations into the future.

“Dwell[ing] in categorical ambiguity” would be Doty’s gloss on such a variety of articulations in the “Letter to Walt Whitman” with which Stevens’ later poetry here forms what I have been calling the Deleuzian intertext. But in several other texts from his most recent *Source*, we can imagine Doty outdistancing Stevens precisely on this issue of the non-categorical and non-peremptory approach to identity—what Deleuze is pleased to refer to as the “pre-individual and impersonal,” a kind of “counter-self”

in modern writing traversed by that “aleatory” otherness mentioned earlier (*Logic of Sense* 176). Thus, from an early poem in the collection entitled “Fish R Us,” where we read about “a billion incipient citizens” that are “suspended, held / at just a bit of distance / (a bit is all there is), all / facing outwards, eyes,” we then move on to one midway through the volume entitled “Elizabeth Bishop” (in “An Island Sheaf” series), and there to ruminate with considerable uncertainty about some “homeless one” daubed into an undated watercolor by Bishop—uncertain because “we aren’t sure what *one* / of anything is. And therefore / must begin the work again—” (45). Until finally we come to the eponymous concluding poem to the collection, entitled “Source,” whose opening stanzas tenderly position its central focus upon “three horses in a fenced field,” but of course “at a slight distance” (74). There, the text’s remaining stanzas climax with the poet’s searching meditation about “the cool womb / of nothing” and the generous “breathing space” (75) rather like Deleuze’s notion of that discursive aleatory point driving all living things into some impossible/compossible state of (non)being:

The poem wants the impossible;

the poem wants a name for the kind nothing
at the core of time, out of which the foals

come tumbling: curled, fetal, dreaming,
.....

Cold, bracing nothing, which mothers forth
mud and mint, hoof and clover, root-hair

and horse-hair and . . .
. . . the rust-spotted little one unfolding itself
into the afternoon. (75)

The contents of this concluding poem, indeed of the entire gathering, becomes rather like those of grandmother’s purse movingly rendered in Doty’s *Still Life* memoir: “each laid out, barely touching the other, each made poignant with distance and time” (15). But whether it takes the form of either poetry or prose, as Deleuze remarks elsewhere, art “no longer selects but affirms the disjointed terms through their distance, without limiting one by the other or excluding one from the other, laying out and passing through the entire set of possibilities” (“He Stuttered” 110–11).

We might conclude, therefore, by pointing to an earlier interview wherein Doty himself remarks upon a similar set of distanced possibilities, observing as he does that “distance, the distance of art, is a great gift

to us because it is a way of standing back and seeing who we are, what we have found." Continues Doty:

We are turning experience around in our hands so we can look at it, see its facets and its possibilities[] . . . to encourage that kind of standing back in order to see that this impulse to write could take many different forms. . . . [Hence,] we can train ourselves to see over time that each impulse has in fact multiple possibilities . . . in order to make better intuitive decisions later on. ("Ice & Salt: An Interview with Mark Doty" 6)

Hence, if "impossibility" is now a means of communication (Deleuze, once again), it is only because "The poem wants the impossible" (Doty, once again), "a name for the kind of nothing at the core of time." Thus in Stevens' early poem "The Snow Man," the infamous "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (*CP* 10) becomes a kind of augury for the self-detachment in his later poetry, wherein distance speaks quietly and large in space to men and women "without reference to their form" and therefore joining them together in "universal freedom" (as in my opening epigraph). Judith Butler theorizes about a "social space for community" in more rigorously gendered terms than either Doty or Stevens, observing as how "a distance will be opened up *between* that hegemonic call to normativizing gender and its critical appropriation" (137). And so, *not quite* the "Cold, bracing nothing" alluded to in Doty's "Source." A better reading for the implied distance of that nothing, I think, comes from a final gloss of Stevens by Doty in his "American Sublime." Although "all in the dark," like Stevens' well-known metaphysician (see my *Wallace Stevens and the Question of Belief* passim), "Nothing. No," Doty scruples to conclude: "Flying, just visible / in the faint signal of the exit sign: / our little hero circumambulating still" (*Source* 69). This "going round"—dare we say Doty's ultimate going the distance with the Poet of Poets in Connecticut?—thus allows us to finesse the Stevens intertext in the supreme fashion of his "Notes toward the Supreme Fiction": "the merely going round . . . [as] a final good" (*CP* 405).

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Merrill and Stevens

LANGDON HAMMER

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO James Merrill was the guest of honor at the Wallace Stevens Centenary celebration held by the University of Connecticut. There was a dinner for him at which members of the University of Connecticut faculty, Hartford insurance executives, and Holly Stevens, the poet's daughter, were present; a poetry reading during which Merrill commented on Stevens and read from his own work; and a big party at a faculty home in the woods. Merrill had recently completed the manuscript of *Scripts for the Pageant*, the third part in his occult poetic trilogy, *The Changing Light at Sandover*.

He was an obvious choice of poet for the occasion. Early in his career, Merrill had assimilated Stevens' aims and ideas, his tastes and manner (we might say precisely his taste *for* manner), even aspects of his diction and phrasing, his sense of poetic line and image.¹ At the same time, while he was absorbing Stevens and being shaped by him, he was interpreting Stevens, placing him in a certain light. In particular, it was Stevens' reputation as an aesthete—what he had to overcome before he gained stature for most readers—that made him appealing to the younger poet. Merrill's Stevens was the aesthete among modern poets. He aided Merrill in crafting his own version of this role, which was in Merrill's case also a homosexual role. Stevens was a poet in whom the "inessential"—the "gaudy," the personal, the reputedly frivolous—could be "suddenly felt as essential" ("Interview" 61). Indeed, Stevens showed Merrill that the role of the aesthete, rather than marginal or eccentric, could be used for a central purpose: the launching of a long poem charged with the task of imagining God for modern readers.

They met only once. It was an important symbolic event: the gala luncheon in October 1954 hosted by Alfred Knopf in honor of Stevens' seventy-fifth birthday and the publication of his *Collected Poems*, less than a year before the poet's death. The seventy-five guests at the event included Marianne Moore, Conrad Aiken, W. H. Auden, Louise Bogan, Lionel Trilling, and Delmore Schwartz. Blanche Knopf, charmed by the twenty-nine-year-old Merrill, seated him at Stevens' table as the house's rising poet, and he made an impression. Stevens mentions Merrill—only Merrill in fact—in the account of the occasion he sent to Witter Byner, his old friend

from the *Harvard Advocate* and another longtime Knopf poet. "There were a lot of people there whom you would have enjoyed quite as much as I did," Stevens told Bynner, "including young James Merrill, who is about the age which you and I were when we were in New York" (L 859). Merrill struck Stevens as a version of his young self—not surprisingly, since Stevens had suggested to Merrill, since he first read him in 1945, a version of the poet he could become.

The nineteen-year-old Merrill read Stevens in the fall of that year in the 1942 Cummington Press edition of *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* ("On Wallace Stevens's Centenary" 216). The Stevens whom Merrill first read was the author of a beautiful rare book published in an edition of 273 copies, itself an art object. (Merrill went on to publish, like Stevens, elegant chapbooks and broadsides with small presses.) "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," of course, is Stevens' grandest poem, a summation of his aesthetics and an important contribution to the modern long poem. Merrill was at the moment a junior English major at Amherst College, who had recently been discharged from the Army because of his poor eyesight after brief service in New Jersey and South Carolina. The Second World War, a crucial context for the writing of the poem, was also part of the context for Merrill's reading of it, a topic to which we shall return.

A second context for Merrill's reading of "Notes" was his relationship with Kimon Friar (Hammer). Friar was an instructor at Amherst that year, hired to teach returning veterans. He gave Merrill a rigorous private education in modern poetry, while at the same time becoming Merrill's first lover. On weekends Merrill accompanied him to New York, where, as director of the Poetry Center at the 92nd Street YMHA (Young Men's and Young Women's Hebrew Association), he lectured on modern poetry, including a course in spring 1946 on the modernist long poem that featured classes on *A Vision*, "The Bridge," "The Waste Land" and "Four Quartets," *The Cantos*, and "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" (YMHA Bulletin 1945–46). Friar viewed these works and the novels of James Joyce and Thomas Mann as modernism's major achievement. All of them were engaged in the basic problem of modern culture: the search for a myth to replace Christian belief. His lecture notes on Stevens' long poem summarize and paraphrase its essential ideas. For example: "Poet's role: to help people to live their lives"; "insistence on sensuousness"; "The poet and his imagination are steeped and formed in a world of sensual reality in the pleasures of merely circulating"; "poetry and life must change[,] things in themselves . . .[,] concepts in the world of imagination[,] the poet himself[,] are all formed in an endless process of continuous change only momentarily arrested by the poems which themselves undergo changes in time" (Lecture Notes).² Friar's notes were then revised for the comment on Stevens that he wrote for his and John Malcolm Brinnin's influential anthology of modern poetry, a book in which the last and youngest poet represented is Merrill.

Merrill's identification with Stevens—its limits as much as its extent—unfolded over decades. In his comments on Stevens at the University of Connecticut in 1979, Merrill described his first reading of the Cummington Press edition of *Notes*: "In it I discovered a vocabulary by turns irresistibly gaudy and irresistibly abstract. Without presuming to guess what the poem or any stanza of it meant, I found myself basking in a climate that Proust might have called one of 'involuntary philosophy.' A world of painterly particulars—interiors, necklaces, elephants in Ceylon—became, upon little more than a single leafing-through of pages, charged with novel meanings; or potentially charged with them; or alternately charged with thought and (by the enchantment of language) absolved from thought as well. I at once set about writing poems in which colorful scenery gave rise to questions about the nature of reality" (*Collected Prose* 216). He presented "The Green Eye," from his *First Poems*, published by Knopf in 1951, as an example of this comically reductive formula. It begins:

Come, child, and with your sunbeam gaze assign
Green to the orchard as a metaphor
For contemplation, seeking to declare
Whether by green you specify the green
Of orchard sunlight, blossom, bark, or leaf,
Or green of an imaginary life. (*Collected Poems* 5)

When he composed this poem, Merrill was at work on a senior thesis about impressionism in Marcel Proust, and in these early literary memories, he associates Stevens and Proust ("*À la Recherche*"). These two writers, he suggests, teach us that to dwell deeply on particulars is to be made to reflect on language, on the acts of speech through which experience is named and known, and so to find one's self in the realm of the "abstract," as Stevens would call it, engaged in a kind of "involuntary philosophy." For Merrill's Stevens as for his Proust, the "green of an imaginary life" grows out of the "green / Of orchard sunlight, blossom, bark, or leaf."

Stevens was not the only important poet for the young Merrill. Friar's lecture course at the 92nd Street YMHA centered on W. B. Yeats, who had been the subject of Friar's master's thesis at the University of Michigan. But Friar's emphasis on Yeats made him too closely associated with Friar, and Merrill looked to Stevens as an alternative, more open to his own purposes. When, later on, Merrill mentions Stevens in interviews, it is usually in relation to T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, and then in order to draw a distinction. For example, Merrill says in an interview that Stevens, in contrast to Eliot and Pound, "seems much more of a poet," by which he means a "nonhistorian." In the same interview (printed in 1968, it was his first substantive interview, and his first attempt to position himself in literary history), Merrill returns often to Stevens. Like Elizabeth Bishop's, and again in contrast to Eliot's and Pound's, Stevens' work, despite "all

the philosophy that intrudes in and between the lines," is, Merrill says, "man-sized," scaled to the individual human life ("Interview" 53). Merrill explains: "I think he continues to persuade us of having had a private life, despite—or thanks to—all the bizarreness of his vocabulary and idiom," that is, despite or thanks to his indulgence of what Merrill calls, quoting a phrase of Stevens' that Friar liked to quote, "The essential gaudiness of poetry'" ("Interview" 51, 61).

Merrill admired the risk that Stevens took, even on the level of diction, of appearing inconsequential and frivolous, and thus dismissed as an aesthete. Merrill would take the same risk. Almost twenty years later, serving as the reader of Stevens' poems in the televised series on American poetry called *Voices & Visions*, Merrill returns to this point and clarifies it: "Stevens," he tells the viewer, "was the first American poet to present himself as *an artist*," in distinction to Robert Frost, Eliot, and Pound (who of course might have argued the point). "Again and again," he says, "you feel that his primary concern was art" ("Wallace Stevens: Man Made Out of Words").

The image of himself that Merrill presents in the Stevens documentary is significant. He is filmed seated on the couch in the rooftop room of his apartment on Water Street in Stonington, Connecticut, in a pressed, collarless shirt, with a shining black piano and a fresh bouquet of flowers visible behind him. That is, he presents himself not as a public figure of some kind, as a professor in a book-lined office or an intellectual in a tie and jacket, but as a poet who is precisely an artist, whose primary concern is art, and who *has* a private life—indeed whose whole relation to poetry is centered in his private life, represented by the interior of his Water Street home. He does not wear a tie there; he does not even wear a collar. That Merrill's private life is specifically a gay life is apparent in these choices of costume and décor—it is part of what he has to say to the viewer about himself and about his admiration for Stevens. It is also unremarked on, left as an implication of personal style. And all of this, the figure of the poet that Merrill projected off and on the page, Stevens helped him to create and validate, imagine and authorize.

A passage from Merrill's diary in 1955 shows him turning to Stevens in something of this way. The summer of 1955 was a pivotal time in Merrill's life. He was just settling into 107 Water Street to make a life with David Jackson. They had bought the apartment in which the *Voices & Visions* documentary would be filmed two decades later, and they had made plans for the remodeling of that upstairs room as a high aesthetic retreat. It was then that the two men were caught up, for the first time, in conversations with the spirit world by means of a Ouija Board. They had experimented with the board without much success since they met in 1953. That summer they made contact with a talkative "familiar spirit" named Ephraim, and easy communication with the dead was established through him.

"How is Wallace Stevens?" Merrill asked one night in 1955, and Ephraim promptly gave way to Stevens, who had died on August 2nd in Hartford.

"Are you acclimatized?" Merrill asked, as if the afterlife were only a matter of altitude. Stevens replied: "Oh yes. Well. JM, I write poems on cloud. [I]t would seem like [a] blackboard—always being erased after each word[,] so I have the charming experience of completely private poetry." Merrill requested a new poem from him, and Stevens did his best to recite the one he had composed that day. "Hartford 1955," as it is called, begins, "Asleep above your sleep . . .," before drifting off into broken, cloudy images of a mother watching her child doze. A discussion of prosody followed this. Then Stevens asked questions of them. "E. tells me you are all quite homosexual. (Yes.) Interesting. So has been a good number of my oldest friends. . . . I was only able to experiment with 2 men. At 17 + 21," Stevens tells them, but he has all but forgotten these long-ago experiments, and the curtain falls (Journal).³

Stevens has a part, but only a cameo part, in *The Changing Light at Sandover*, Merrill's contribution to the genre of the modern long poem he studied with Friar, the story of his and David Jackson's long romance with the Other World. The role Stevens has in Merrill's early diary entry, where he is confiding and gossipy yet also able to write poetry and discuss it, is assigned in *Sandover* to another poet, W. H. Auden. Auden is appropriate to that role in ways Stevens was not, not least because he was a friend of Merrill's and a gay man, which Stevens could only be in Merrill's fantasy. But Auden's poetry itself matters less to *Sandover* than Yeats's or Stevens' does.⁴ In order to take his place in the Sandover séances, it was necessary for Auden to recant—posthumously, with the assistance of Merrill and Jackson—much of his published beliefs, religious, moral, and literary. By contrast, the occult apparatus of the trilogy is obviously Yeatsian, as are some of the curious doctrines obtained through the board (as indeed the whole notion of such doctrines is Yeatsian).

It is Stevens, though, who gives the trilogy its simple, primary theme. "Stevens imagined the imagination / And God as one" (*The Changing Light* 66) begins section "S" of *The Book of Ephraim*, the first part of the trilogy. These lines allude to "The Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" where Stevens writes: "We say God and the imagination are one . . . / How high that highest candle lights the dark" (CP 524). In the *Voices & Visions* documentary, Merrill opens his copy of Stevens' *Collected Poems* and reads that poem. When he finishes, he seems to blink away tears, then laughs: "I feel about that poem the same way some people feel about the 23rd Psalm." It is a central poem in Stevens' oeuvre, as Merrill goes on to explain, recalling his own early ideas about impressionism and Proust: "Stevens' poetic project?—I suppose it was to bring his readers into a consciousness of their part in divinity, a divinity stripped of theological trappings—but to understand that the way they saw things, the way they received the world, the way, in short, their imaginations operated, was of ultimate interest, and could attain to all kinds of splendor and refinement" (*Voices & Visions*). The long poem's title, *The Changing Light at Sandover*, evokes this

sense of the primacy of perception, the radiant contingencies of truth. It alludes, arguably, to lines in the poem to "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," where the poet says to his muse, his interior paramour:

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)

Stevens enters into what is most high-minded in Merrill, then, his most intense poetic idealizations. But he was also an instigation to self-scrutiny and skepticism for Merrill, even as he worked on *The Changing Light at Sandover*. Although, or precisely because, he saw Stevens as a "nonhistorian" like himself, Merrill was led by Stevens to brood on the relationship between poetry and history, and Stevens seems to prompt questions he repeatedly asked himself. With the role of the aesthete, Merrill took on Stevens' vulnerability to the accusation, made during the 1930s and during the Second World War, that his poetry was irrelevant to historical struggle as a bourgeois luxury, an ornament. Stevens' answer to that charge, in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," for example, helped shape Merrill's response, in part because he was skeptical toward Stevens' heroic claims for poetry.

In closing, I want to look quickly at a poem that suggests these aspects of Merrill's reading of Stevens. It is "Page from the Koran," one of the poems that Merrill chose to read at the University of Connecticut on the occasion of the Stevens Centenary in 1979:

A small vellum environment
Overrun by black
Scorpions of Kufic script—their ranks
All trigger tail and gold vowel-sac—
At auction this mild winter morning went
For six hundred Swiss francs.

By noon, fire from the same blue heavens
Had half erased Beirut.
Allah be praised, it said on crude handbills,
For guns and Nazarenes to shoot.
"How gladly with proper words," said Wallace Stevens,
"The soldier dies." Or kills.

God's very word, then, stung the heart
To greed and rancor. Yet
Not where the last glow touches one spare man
Inked-in against his minaret

—Letters so handled they are life, and hurt,
Leaving the scribe immune? (*Collected Poems* 428)

Kufic script is the calligraphy used in the earliest transcriptions of the Koran. The page Merrill is writing about, set apart from the rest of the Koran, becomes, in the hands of Western auctioneers, a rare commodity for scholars and collectors, something like the Cummington Press edition of *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* (a copy of the 1942 edition of which in "about Fine" condition now brings a price of \$4500). The second stanza here, describing the catastrophic Israeli-Palestinian war in Lebanon in December 1975 when Merrill composed the poem (Worksheets), refers again to Stevens' "Notes." The line quoted comes from the epilogue to the poem, beginning, "Soldier, there is a war between the mind / And sky" (CP 407). Israeli missiles, falling out of the blue sky, mock Stevens' metaphor. So do the "crude handbills" praising Allah "for guns and Nazarenes to shoot." Stevens, writing during the Second World War, proposes that the poet's war and the soldier's are "a plural, a right and left, a pair, / Two parallels that meet if only in / The meeting of their shadows" (CP 407). Merrill points out at once how far away and how near, how entangled are those parallel wars. There is, in Merrill's quotation, a sense that poetic language really is no help to the dying soldier, but that it might be used by another man as a justification for killing—that imaginative language is not only susceptible to such uses, but primed for them. Indeed, the supreme fictions of the world's religions, what modern poetry endeavors to replace, according to Kimon Friar, sting "the heart / To greed and rancor." When we reflect on the image of Kufic script's scorpion-like "trigger tail and golden vowel-sac," overrunning the "small vellum environment" of the page, Merrill seems to say that "greed and rancor," a primal will to power, are already present in the scribe's hand—in writing itself.

When he wrote this poem, Merrill was just embarking on *The Changing Light at Sandover*, where he presents himself as the scribe of the Other World. He had a precedent for this poetic stance in Stevens' image of the poet as rabbi and scholar, a figure suggested by that single man calling the faithful to prayer from a high room, "Inked-in against his minaret" as if he were himself a glyph. He is "spare" in more than one sense: he is lean and ascetic, meaning "man-sized," human and nothing more; yet he is also somehow superfluous, extra, half in and half out of a world that is at war around him—having been discharged from military service, let us say, for poor eyesight. Does that mean he will be spared? Should he be? Can he be? Left open in the poem's closing lines, these are questions about poetry's relationship to history that persisted for Merrill from the beginning of his poetic career during wartime to the 1970s and beyond. Evidently they are questions that he could not ask without also thinking about Stevens.

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Notes

¹Moffett briefly describes Merrill's verbal borrowings from Stevens (22). See also Yenser *passim*.

²Quotations from Kimon Friar's papers appear by permission of Special Collections, Rare Books and Archives, The American College of Greece, Athens.

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⁴On Merrill's ambivalent relation to Yeats, see Bauer; for treatments of Auden's influence on Merrill, see Gwiazda and Wasley.

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Recontextualizing the Early Stevens: Stevens, Loy, and Winters

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I

ONE OF THE EARLIEST and most devoted proponents of Wallace Stevens' poetry was Yvor Winters, a figure now remembered primarily for his cantankerous defense of traditional poetic form and for his egregiously restrictive view of the English poetic canon. Joseph Riddel notes that, during the period leading up to *Harmonium*, "Winters, almost alone among critics, had consistently praised Stevens' very early work" (284 n5). What Riddel does not note is that this was a radically different Winters from the one who would later come to find fault with the post-*Harmonium* Stevens. In the late teens and early twenties, when Winters insisted on Stevens' central importance among those modern poets he regarded as experimentalists, he was still himself very much an experimentalist, one who was interested in building upon the innovative forms of verbal play that he discerned in Stevens' poetic diction.¹

The term "experimental" is, of course, an ambiguous one. As both Susan Howe and Helen Vendler remind us, Stevens himself would greatly expand the concept of the experimental by suggesting, "All poetry is experimental poetry" (*OP* 187). But to many observers, including Winters, the early Stevens appeared to be experimental in a narrower, more purely formal sense. Although it has sometimes been maintained that Stevens was always tied to a conservatively symbolist mode, the initial impression conveyed by the bulk of Stevens' early work was that he was very much a member of the poetic avant-garde.² Indeed, on the basis of the poetry by Ezra Pound and Stevens that was widely available during the late teens and early twenties, it would have been fairly easy to have come to the conclusion that Stevens was every bit as interested in formal experimentation as Pound was. In the assortment of poems included in Pound's 1926 *Personae*, one can find considerably more in the way of archaic diction and contorted syntax than one can find in the whole of *Harmonium*.

In revisiting Winters' role in the history of Stevens' early reception, I would like to do more than perform an antiquarian exercise. Although I have no interest in reviving Winters' often-dubious judgments, I do be-

lieve that, by reexamining the manner in which Winters initially sought to frame Stevens' work, we can begin to rethink, in potentially important ways, Stevens' place in twentieth-century poetry. As Winters' early response to Stevens reminds us, there was a time when Stevens was seen to be working in an experimentalist mode that made him not some sort of "late Romantic" but, instead, an emphatically modernist innovator who was testing the limits of poetic diction.³ It is indeed true that, long before *Harmonium* belatedly appeared, Pound had achieved a level of preeminence that, in the eyes of most observers, Stevens seemed unlikely ever to achieve. But it is also true that no one, at that time, had yet begun to speak either of a "Pound era" or a "Stevens era."

Given the extent to which such broad forms of periodization have served to restrict critical inquiry in ways that have been counterproductive, it might be helpful to return to a moment at which Louis Untermeyer could feel free to treat Stevens more harshly than Adelaide Crapsey, a poet with whom—using the painterly rubric "The Impressionists"—he chose, in the 1928 edition of his *American Poetry Since 1900*, to group Stevens.⁴ In a manner that reflects many early perceptions of Stevens' importance, Untermeyer characterizes Stevens as someone who "does not appreciate the edges of language" (325). Reading this phrase today, one recoils from Untermeyer's condescendingly dismissive tone. Yet there is a grain of truth in Untermeyer's observations about the manner in which Stevens seems, at times, to be disturbingly intoxicated by the sound and rhythm of words. Emphasizing the experimental dimension of the diction used in Stevens' early work, Untermeyer accuses Stevens of "seeking only for the play of rhythmic nuance" and of therefore neglecting the meanings of words: "Caring little for content," Untermeyer claims, "he retreats further and further into an obscure verbalism" (325). This critique of Stevens is framed in terms virtually identical to those in which, in the introduction to the first collected edition of his early poetry, Winters would retroactively explain his own abandonment of free verse:

In the long run, however, the free verse and the associational procedure in the use of imagery and in the interrelation of images and other passages proved severely restrictive. In the last two groups, especially, in this collection, the movement, and consequently the diction, were often violent; form dictated the state of mind and often the subject, and these were not always intelligent. (*The Collected Poetry of Yvor Winters* 16–17)

In this piece of self-criticism, Winters adopts the tone of a repentant sinner—a tone that is very much in keeping with the formalistic moralism that pervades his later criticism. But, in my effort to use the early Winters as a means of recontextualizing the early Stevens, I am not directly concerned with the efforts that the later Winters made to justify his own aban-

donment of modernist modes of rhythmic and linguistic experimentation. Instead, I am concerned primarily with examining the way in which, during the first phase of Winters' poetic career, the early work of Stevens appeared to offer a line of experimentation that a young poet could fruitfully treat as a precedent, especially (as Winters' retroactive observations make clear) at the level of poetic diction.

In a manner that seems almost to have been designed to refute the early criticism that (to repeat Untermeyer's formulation) he "car[ed] little for content," the later Stevens would become a vehement advocate of the supremacy of content over verbal form. In a 1951 lecture, Stevens famously insists that there are two types of "modern poetry . . . one that is modern in respect to what it says, the other that is modern in respect to form" (NA 167–68). In what is typically interpreted as a gesture of self-justification, Stevens proceeds to add that the first of these two types of poetry "accepts a banality of form as incidental to its language" (NA 168). Banality, however, is very much in the eye of the beholder. And, certainly, at the level of diction, Stevens' work, both early and late, far from being banal, exudes a profound degree of interest in what Pound, in "How to Read," terms "*logopoeia*," which he defines as "the dance of the intellect among words' " (*Literary Essays* 25).

In thus invoking the concept of *logopoeia*, I am thinking, in part, of Marjorie Perloff's suggestion that Mina Loy should be seen as a poet who employs *logopoeia* as her dominant method. This can just as readily be said about the early Stevens and, for that matter, about the early Winters. Frank Kermode long ago noted "the real affinity with Laforgue, of which Stevens' *logopoeia*—to use Pound's term—is one aspect" (30). In their early work, Stevens and Winters—like Loy—create poems that exemplify the degree to which *logopoeia*, as Pound defines it, "employs words not only for their direct meaning, but [also] . . . takes count in a special way of habits of usage, of the context we *expect* to find with the word, its usual concomitants, of its known acceptances, and of ironical play" (*Literary Essays* 25). Although there are, in Stevens, many moments of *melopoeia*—moments in which the words emphasize "some musical property" (*Literary Essays* 25)—there is, I would insist, a far greater reliance on *logopoeia*. After all, despite Stevens' frequent indulgence in *melopoeic* wordplay (both dissonant and harmonious), few of Stevens' poems would be valued on the basis of sound alone; as Kermode (paraphrasing R. P. Blackmur) rightly observes, far from being the product of *melopoeia* run amuck, "The language of *Harmonium* is an *accurate* language" (31). In an intriguing, and highly pertinent, fashion, Pound places a special emphasis on the degree to which *logopoeia* "holds the aesthetic content which is peculiarly the domain of verbal manifestation, and cannot possibly be contained in plastic or in music" (*Literary Essays* 25). In their shared insistence on challenging verbal "habits of usage" (*Literary Essays* 25) by means of *logopoeic* strategies, Stevens, Loy, and Winters can all be seen to participate in a mode of poetic practice that,

although it reflects a distinctly Poundian concept, ends up taking them far from the Poundian preference for seeing the poet either as a sculptor of images or a composer of ideograms. It is this shared affinity for the *logopoeic* that impels Winters not only to become an early advocate of Stevens but also to remain, from the late teens through the 1960s, virtually the only critic who would continue to acknowledge Loy's importance.⁵

II

Given the obscurity that continues to surround Winters' efforts as both poet and critic, it might be helpful to trace briefly the history of Winters' role as a pioneering advocate of Stevens. Winters' first major public declaration of his devotion to Stevens can be found in a 1922 issue of *Poetry*, where he rounds out a review of Edward Arlington Robinson by alluding to Stevens and by asking, "To what extent Mr. Robinson may have influenced this greatest of living and of American poets" (*Uncollected Essays and Reviews* 10). In the genealogy of American poetry that Winters constructs, the line that links Stevens to Robinson can ultimately be traced back to Emerson by way of Emily Dickinson, who, Winters maintains, "was greater than Emerson, was one of the greatest poets of our language, but was more or less in the tradition that Emerson began" (*Uncollected Essays and Reviews* 4). In thus tracing Stevens' work back to an Emersonian line that runs through Dickinson, Winters distinguishes himself from those later proponents of Stevens (such as Bloom) who will seek instead to associate Stevens' work with an Emersonian line that runs through Whitman. In defending this preference for Dickinson over Whitman, Winters tends, especially in the later stages of his career, to rely on broad notions of spiritual and moral discipline. It seems apparent, however, that the early Winters would have been drawn to Dickinson for the same aesthetic reason that he was drawn to Loy and to Stevens: that is, he would have been drawn to her *logopoeic* strategies of verbal defamiliarization.

Also of significance is the degree to which, in a way that has been surprisingly uncommon in subsequent criticism, Winters was inclined, throughout the 1920s, to place Stevens in direct juxtaposition with such contemporaries as Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, and, as I have been emphasizing, Mina Loy. From the perspective of the young Winters, Stevens was the central figure in the emerging field of modern poetry. Indeed, so great was his enthusiasm for Stevens that, four years before the publication of *Harmonium*, he was attempting to compile his own, *samizdat* edition of Stevens' poems: by "the winter of 1919," Janet Lewis reports, Winters "was keeping a notebook of any poems by Stevens which could be found in periodicals" (126). In a world without photocopying, the compilation of a notebook of this sort required a considerable degree of labor. In his willingness to go to such pains to create an unofficial collection of Stevens' work, Winters reveals himself to have been interested in being among the first to consecrate Stevens as a fully canoni-

cal figure, at the same time as he exhibits a desire to treat Stevens' work as a somewhat exclusive form of avant-garde cultural capital.

Throughout this early stage of his career, Winters was regularly writing letters to friends and acquaintances in which he praised Stevens as one of a select group of contemporary poets worthy of sustained attention. For example, in a 1921 letter to Harriet Monroe, the editor of *Poetry* magazine, Winters promotes the work of Marianne Moore by declaring, "With the exception of Mr. Stevens, she is about the only person since Rimbaud who has had any very profound or intricate knowledge and command of sound" (*Selected Letters of Yvor Winters* 45). In the same letter, he revealingly includes one other poet—Mina Loy—in the august company of Moore and Stevens: "I think Mina Loy a genius, though I don't know any of her work that is as perfect as Miss Moore's best" (45). Writing to Robert Liddel Lowe in January of 1927, Winters provides an expanded version of his list of his favorite moderns, a list that includes not just Loy, Moore, and Stevens, but also Williams, Hart Crane, Archibald MacLeish, Pound, and T. S. Eliot. By 1968, when Winters published his final book of criticism, *Forms of Discovery*, his poetic preferences had become considerably more constricted. Moore, for instance, had undergone a substantial demotion, and all of Stevens' work from *Ideas of Order* onward had been excised from the Wintersian canon. But the Stevens of *Harmonium* continued (with some notable exceptions) to be celebrated, as did the Loy of *Lunar Baedeker*.

Winters' connection to Stevens, though indirect, was not simply that of an unknown worshipper from afar. As it happens, Winters and Stevens shared a mutual friend in the form of Alice Corbin Henderson, whom Winters first met in 1921, while undergoing treatment for tuberculosis at a sanatorium in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Stevens and Henderson would soon exchange opinions regarding this young poetic contender. Writing to Henderson in March of 1922, Stevens reluctantly acknowledges that, if only for reasons of self-interest, he possesses a limited degree of affection for Winters. Noting that Winters has "sent me a copy of his recent attenuations," Stevens concedes, "I like Winters, I suppose, because he likes me but he doesn't exactly smell of whiskey and I expect nothing from him. So many people play tunes on their finger-nails and think they are making the welkin ring" (*CPP* 939). In thus suggesting that Winters lacks the poetic strength that is here metaphorically associated with the act of drinking whiskey, Stevens emphatically relegates Winters to the minor ranks to which such critics as Untermeyer were, at that time, inclined to relegate Stevens himself. There is no reason to suppose that Stevens eventually adopted a more sympathetic view of Winters. In a letter written to José Rodríguez Feo in January of 1945, for instance, Stevens would boast that he had not bothered to read the critique of his work that Winters had recently published in *The Anatomy of Nonsense*.

Given Stevens' relative indifference to Winters—and given Winters' emphatically marginal position in virtually all accounts of twentieth-century poetic history—it may seem odd to employ Winters as a means of recontextualizing the early Stevens. Certainly, Stevens himself would appear to have been considerably more impressed by R. P. Blackmur's early advocacy of his work than he ever was by Winters' even earlier advocacy. What is easily forgotten is that Blackmur chose to place a high value on Stevens' work in large part because, in the initial stages of his critical career—that is, during the years in which he worked for *Hound and Horn*—he had been an ardent follower of Winters.⁶ What is also easily forgotten is that, in his own early, experimental poetry, Winters was attempting to situate himself in what he imagined to be Stevens' post-Emersonian tradition of the new: a tradition that, with its philosophical tendencies—and with its proclivity for *logopoetic* diction—could readily be seen to be the same one in which Mina Loy was working.

III

It is in this context that I now wish briefly to touch on three poems that will help illustrate the formal and thematic connections that I am attempting to trace: Winters' "To the Painter Polelonema," Loy's "Mexican Desert," and Stevens' "The Load of Sugar-Cane." It is notable that all three of the poets represented by these examples—Winters, Loy, and Stevens—were ultimately to find their early work unsatisfactory. The most famous instance, of course, is that of Stevens, who, after a prolonged hiatus, would begin, in *Ideas of Order*, to move in the direction of his later aesthetic, an aesthetic in which the irregularity of free verse tends almost entirely to be discarded in favor of a prevailing preference for loose forms of iambic pentameter. Over the course of the same period—the late 1920s—Winters would also move away from free-verse experimentation and would choose instead to concentrate on the writing of rhymed traditional verse in which an emphasis is placed on strict metrical regularity. In Loy's case, the shift, during this period, is even more extreme: her poetic production would drastically slow, and she would abandon entirely the effort to participate actively in the modern poetry scene.⁷

I will begin with the opening lines of Loy's "Mexican Desert," lines in which *logopoetic* characteristics are amply apparent:

The belching ghost-wail of the locomotive
trailing her rattling wooden tail
into the jazz-band sunset. . . . (Loy 74)

The pivotal moment in these lines occurs in the image of "the jazz-band sunset," an image that, in a way that rejects any notion of the painterly, associates the intense sonic experience of jazz with the visual experience of a sunset in the desert. In her essay "Modern Poetry"—her only essay

devoted to issues of poetics—Loy asserts that “our attitude in reading a poem must be . . . that of listening to and looking at a pictured song” (157). In the image of the “jazz-band sunset,” this fusion of the visual and the auditory is made explicit in a way that disrupts the sense of solitude that pervades the desert and that moves us in the direction of *logopoeia* by virtue of its reliance on what (to repeat Pound’s formulation) “is peculiarly the domain of verbal manifestation.”

In the opening lines of “To the Painter Polelonema”—a poem addressed to the Hopi Indian painter Otis Polelonema (1902–1981), a figure who emerged during the Santa Fe Renaissance of the 1920s—Winters evokes Polelonema’s paintings of the American desert Southwest in a fashion that blurs sensory boundaries:

You wring life
from the rock
from gold air
violent with odors
smoking wrath (*Collected Poetry* 79)

The pivotal moment in these lines occurs in the phrase “gold air.” Although it is true that the sky, at sunset, can reasonably be described as “gold,” there is something distinctly defamiliarizing about Winters’ attempt to describe the air itself as gold. Air, after all, is commonly regarded as invisible, as something we breathe, not as something we visually observe. To ascribe to the air the quality of being “gold” is to cross a boundary between distinct modes of sensory perception. More important, it is to acknowledge, in an emphatically logopoeic fashion, the aesthetic division between what the poet can do in words and what the painter can do in visual images.

In the example from Winters, by contrast with the example from Loy, the blurring involves not the audible and the visible, but, rather, the visible and the olfactory. The “gold air” is characterized as being “violent with odors.” Although the poem is being respectfully addressed to a painter, Winters makes no effort to be painterly. Instead, in an emphatically logopoeic fashion, he stresses the ability of poetic language to exceed what can be done (to borrow Pound’s terms again) “in plastic or in music.” By raising the sense of smell to the same level as the sense of sight, Winters challenges the prevailing, quasi-impressionistic hierarchy of the senses, in which sight tends to be regarded as the most valuable sense, whereas such tactile senses as smell and touch tend to be regarded as considerably more negligible.⁸ The point, of course, is not to celebrate smell, but, rather, to demonstrate the synesthetic power that distinguishes verbal art from the other arts.

In much of Stevens’ early poetry, we can detect a similar interest in the intersection of distinct modes of sensory perception and a similar stress

on the superiority of that which belongs (yet again to repeat Pound) to “the domain of verbal manifestation.” It is hardly accidental that in “To the Roaring Wind,” the final poem of *Harmonium*, we are presented with an almost prayerful invocation of the constructed deity “Vocalissimus,” who looks for syllables “In the distances of sleep” (CP 113). Stevens’ “The Load of Sugar-Cane,” at first glance, might seem to participate fully in an Imagist aesthetic, since it is built upon the elaboration of something seen: a “glade-boat.” Stevens, however, makes a point of using overt similes rather than the more purely associative procedures of Imagism; indeed, the recurring use of the word “like” can be seen to tie the poem to a relatively conventional aesthetic. But the dominant tendency of the poem—a tendency that is in no way undermined by its overt stress on its verbalism—is toward the same logopoeic aesthetic that we have noted in both Loy and Winters.

In the middle lines of the poem, Stevens gives us a clear illustration of his penchant for using words in ways that displace them, that sunder them from their usual habitations:

Under the rainbows
That are like birds,
Turning, bedizened. . . . (CP 12)

There is much in these lines that deserves unpacking. However, I wish, for my present purposes, simply to focus on a single word: “bedizened.” The occurrence of this word would seem to be an example of what Untermeyer regards as the inappropriateness of much of Stevens’ diction. After all, from the perspective of someone expecting to find, throughout the poem, language appropriate to the world of glade-boats and sugar plantations, the word “bedizened” must almost inevitably appear to be an instance of inappropriately elevated diction. But, if we recognize the *logopoeic* dimension of the poem, we can discern in this allusion to birds “bedizened”—that is, to birds “[d]ressed up with vulgar finery” (*Oxford English Dictionary*)—a heteroglossic playing with the accepted registers of poetic diction.

Although this extremely impure conception of poetic diction has long been accepted in the work of Stevens, it was, for a considerable period of time, an obstacle to the acceptance of Loy. Only recently has it become possible to declare, as Perloff does, that “Loy’s poetic language no longer appears especially eccentric” (146). In the case of Winters, the oddness of his logopoeically based word choices remains an obstacle: even the sympathetic Donald Davie was always inclined to regard Winters as someone who—at all stages of his career—was overly inclined to swerve from the normative patterns of poetic diction.⁹ When we set the early Winters alongside the early Stevens and the early Loy, however, we begin to discern, in the apparent eccentricities, a commonality of poetic purpose.

Pound, for his part, most certainly was not immune to the temptations of *logopoeic* impurity. At the close of canto 80 of the *Pisan Cantos*, for instance, he conjures up a poetic juxtaposition that moves us entirely away from the visual clarity of *phanopoeia*: “sunset grand couturier” (*Cantos* 536). Jean-Michel Rabaté describes this line as “flippant” (165)—and, indeed, we witness in it the same logopoeic flippancy that leads Loy to speak of a “jazz-band sunset,” that leads Winters to describe visual art by analogy with the sense of smell, and that (in a manner that resembles Pound’s dressmaking analogy) leads Stevens to speak of birds as “bedizened.” As this example from Pound indicates, it is likely that, once we begin recontextualizing the early Stevens by situating him in relation to poets with whom he is only rarely compared, we will also find ourselves compelled to recontextualize him in relation to those poets, such as Pound, who are all too easily regarded simply as his aesthetic antagonists.

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Notes

¹ Virtually the only critic to have made strong claims for the value of Winters’ early poetry is Winters’ former student Kenneth Fields, according to whom “Yvor Winters’ early poems share much of the backgrounds of the best experimental writers of the teens and twenties; they have a place of importance along with the work of Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and James Joyce” (“Forms of the Mind” 938).

² The best known example of this critique is Marjorie Perloff’s “Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?”

³ In *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, for instance, Harold Bloom insists that Stevens’ “work is most certainly in the Romantic traditions—British and American—of the crisis-poem” (2).

⁴ Winters’ own enduring admiration for Crapsey’s work would eventually come to be regarded as an extreme example of the capriciousness of his poetic tastes.

⁵ As of the late 1960s, the only academic, apart from Winters, who was taking Loy seriously was Winters’ close student, Kenneth Fields (see Fields’s “The Poetry of Mina Loy”).

⁶ The enormous influence of Winters on Blackmur is evident throughout the various essays on poetry that are collected in Blackmur’s *Language as Gesture*, albeit the influence often takes the form of a resistance to Winters’ growing formal conservatism.

⁷ For a detailed account of Loy’s unique career trajectory, see Carolyn Burke’s *Becoming Modern: The Life of Mina Loy*.

⁸ These remarks are informed and inspired by Fredric Jameson’s discussion of “the autonomization of sight” (232) in the work of Joseph Conrad.

⁹ In his introduction to the *Collected Poetry of Yvor Winters*, Donald Davie singles out Winters’ diction as the chief reason why Winters is “not a good model for young poets of today to emulate” (7).

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Stevens', Ahem, Folk Songs: "Sur Ma Guzzla Gracile"

CHRIS BEYERS

SINCE ACCESS TO WALLACE STEVENS' poetry is typically through *The Collected Poems* and *Opus Posthumous*, the titles the poet sometimes contrived for groups of poems he sent to little magazines—titles that disappeared when the poems were collected into books—generally slip under the critical radar. For this reason, the significance of the most interesting of these titles, "Sur Ma Guzzla Gracile," has never been adequately discussed.

The title functions as a surprisingly complex one-line poem that gives insight into how Stevens understood his poems, and how he would have his contemporary audience understand them, in 1921, when the sequence first appeared in *Poetry* magazine. Moreover, while typically the order of poems in *Collected Poems* is the order of poems in the group as first published, for "Sur Ma Guzzla Gracile" the order is quite different.¹ Before I discuss the title's source and meaning, three things bear mentioning: 1) the groups of poems Stevens sent to magazines were often thematically and formally related; 2) the titles were generally descriptive in some way, though sometimes obliquely so; and 3) Stevens did not have a drawer full of unpublished poems ready to go at any time—when he was asked to submit poems, he generally had to write them to order. Thus, we can conclude with some assurance that groups of poems sent to magazines were written about the same time and subject to the same intellectual and cultural pressures.

Those critics who have considered "Sur Ma Guzzla Gracile" as a sequence often find it striking without quite being able to put their finger on why it is so. John J. Enck describes the poems as an "askew glance" by Stevens with "his lute with a single string" (54), while for A. Walton Litz, the title "suggests elegant variations upon the sort of antique musical instrument which attracted Stevens"—e.g., the harmonium—adding, "but the first poems in the series are anything but tuneful" (97). More recently, Robin Gail Schulze calls the sequence "an exercise in ventriloquism" for a voice that "resembles Stevens's foppish alter ego, Peter Parasol" (26), while Tony Sharpe more severely characterizes the title as "obscurely rebarbative" (89) and the poems as displaying "Aubrey Beardsleyishness or gargoyl-

ism" (89–90). Schulze translates Stevens' "buffo title" as "From Out of My Slender Gullet" (25), but if Stevens wanted to say that, he likely would have called the sequence "Sur Ma Gosier Gracile." The rest understand the "guzzla" as a musical instrument, yet do not say why, of all instruments, Stevens chose a *gusla*, nor why the title is in French.

I will deal with the instrumentation first. "Guzzla" is more generally transliterated in English *gusle* or *gusla*; the French spelling is *guzla*. I will talk about the extra *z* in a bit. The name of the instrument comes from the Serbian word for "spoon." If you take a wooden spoon about 30 inches long, stretch it over the part you would put in your mouth, thread a single horsehair string, get yourself a bow, sit in the position of the guitarist in Picasso's painting *The Old Guitarist*, and memorize a few Turkish, Bulgarian, or Serbo-Croatian oral epics, then you are ready to be a *guslar*.

If you glance down the list of poems in Stevens' sequence, you will not find anything that reminds you of the little *Iliads* of Slavic oral poetry. This is because Stevens' title implies a mode of transmission and not a subject. The entry for "gusla" in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* is revealing: "As the *guslar* sings to his own accompaniment, he tunes the string to suit the range of his voice." Poems on such an instrument are thus especially subjective explorations of a single, restricted viewpoint. Compare, in this regard, Stevens' similar metaphor in "The Man with a Blue Guitar":

A million people on one string?
And all their manner in the thing,

And all their manner, right and wrong,
And all their manner, weak and strong?

The feelings crazily, craftily call,
Like a buzzing of flies in autumn air,

And that's life, then: things as they are,
This buzzing of the blue guitar. (CP 166–67)

The manner in which these questions are asked does not suggest a confident "yes" for reply. Although the buzzing of the guitar seems natural since it mimics the flies, Stevens knew how to play the guitar and so knew that guitar strings buzz when they are improperly fretted. I think we are to understand that, in Stevens' more complex view, the adequate song for reality and the imagination needs more than one string.

It is time to turn to the matter of the French title. By way of analogy, consider this anecdote: when Sydney McLean asked Stevens about the meaning of the title "Peter Quince at the Clavier," Stevens replied, " 'It's in Shakespeare, isn't it?' " (Brazeau 188). Although that reply apparently

had the virtue of cutting off further discussion, it in no way answers the implied questions put to him, which more precisely might be stated, "Why is the rude mechanical sitting at a clavier and what does that have to do with the poem?"

Stevens' curt reply makes sense only if there is a definable field of reference for Peter Quince, for the clavier, and for these two figures in conjunction. And Stevens apparently felt there was. I do not doubt that, at times, he dissolves a poem's main image into polysemy, ambiguity, indeterminacy, and aporia. Yet there is a side of him that could assert, as he does in "The Relations between Poetry and Painting," "Pretty much all of the seventeenth century, in France, at least, can be summed up in one word: classicism" (NA 172); or contend, as he does in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," "The tradition of Italy is the tradition of the imagination. The tradition of Spain is the tradition of reality" (NA 9). Especially when he was thinking historically and culturally, Stevens' judgments could be monolithic and totalizing.

Thus, if we were to get a television psychic to contact Stevens from the Other Side and ask him about the meaning of "Guzzla," his answer almost certainly would be, "Well, how many French *guzlas* are there?" As far as I can tell, the answer is two: an opera Bizet never completed² and the famous hoax of Prosper Mérimée. Mérimée is perhaps best known today as the author of the novel that was turned into the opera *Carmen*. He generally figures prominently in studies of nineteenth-century French prose style. Stevens' title alludes to an 1827 work entitled *La Guzla. A Choice of Illyrian Poems Collected in Dalmatia, Bosnia, Croatia, and Herzegovina*.³ However, as Mérimée admitted in the preface to the 1842 edition,⁴ it was nothing of the kind. It seems that he wanted to travel to Illyria but lacked the money, so he concocted a hoax to pay for the trip. He read a travel book and a census report on the area, learned five or six Slavic words, and, writing a prose ballad a day, soon completed his book.

Mérimée's English biographer, A. W. Raitt, points out that one of the thirty-two "translations" was actually "genuine," and it had already been translated into French; the rest were a "clever" "pastiche" that shows a "considerable familiarity with the themes and techniques of European folk-poetry" (Raitt 58–59). More accurately, Mérimée was well aware of the conventions of translations of such poetries. Slavic critics have since taken the book to task, because in form and subject matter, it is not at all like the poetry it is supposed to collect. Nonetheless, it sold well, received positive reviews, hoodwinked some Slavophiles, and various ballads were translated into Russian (by Pushkin, who was fooled), German, and English (by Mary Shelley, who was not).

Mérimée's book begins with an elaborate metafiction—an unnamed narrator, born in Italy but now residing in France, had once lived in the Illyrian provinces and learned the language. While traveling through these areas, he came to know a Slavic *guslar* whose improbable name, Hyacinthe

Maglanovitch, is matched only by his improbably romantic biography, which includes an abduction, two conversions, love, murder, pastoral idylls, great-heartedness, and petty thievery.

La Guzla is offered as a transcription of the ballads he sings, which are tales, often violent, of vampires, the evil eye, battle heroics, revenge, love, and jealousy. For example, "*Les Braves Heiduques*" relates the story of a family of highwaymen besieged in a cavern; when the mother dies of starvation, the oldest son "*regardait le cadavre de sa mère avec des yeux comme ceux d'un loup voit un agneau*" ["looks at his mother's corpse as a wolf looks at a sheep"] (55); seeing this, the younger son quickly pierces his own arm, offering his blood as a substitute. Fortunately, the father intervenes, convinces his sons that it is better to go out in a blaze of glory, and the three race out to attack their besiegers. They are shot dead, of course, but not before killing ten soldiers apiece.

For all the stories' uncommon and tragic events, they nonetheless partake in what might be called the romance of the folk: while educated readers may congratulate themselves that they do not live such desperate lives, they also may feel a pang of regret that their own messy existences seemingly do not provide opportunity for decisive, passionate action in situations where alternatives are clear and uncomplicated.

Granted, these sorts of stories do not sound very much like the poems in Stevens' sequence—although they *are* the sorts of tales of high passion that Stevens' monocled uncle asserts are "a theme for Hyacinth alone" (CP 15). In fact, the phrase that Stevens used as the title for his sequence does not appear in *La Guzla*: Maglanovitch generally refers to himself in the third person and never calls his instrument slender. Further, nowhere in the book is *guzla* spelled with two zeds. I suspect Stevens just misremembered the spelling, but it is worth noting that he is alluding to an oral tradition originally transliterated into a Cyrillic alphabet. One really cannot misspell a word that has no original spelling, so Stevens' double-z *guzla* has as much claim to authenticity as any other spelling.

I am arguing that Stevens meant to indicate a mode of transmission and not subject matter. In fact, I doubt that Stevens knew any of the tales of *La Guzla*, since by 1921 the work had become rare; it became generally available to twentieth-century readers only when Eugène Marsan edited the work in 1928. Nonetheless, Stevens had ample opportunity to have heard about the hoax, which was (and is) frequently recounted in histories of French literature and, more importantly, almost universally enfolded within a suggestive narrative detailed by such writers as Walter Pater and Arthur Symons. This narrative provides the key to how Stevens understood his poems in 1921.

We have a remarkably consistent account of Merimeé's character. Symons quotes Stendhal, who remarked that, like his mother, Merimeé gave " 'way to emotion once a year' " (iii). Pater suggests this "rooted habit of intellectual reserve" (17–18) came from hearing, early in child-

hood, “a half-pitying laugh at his expense,” after which Merimeé decided “to be forever on his guard, especially against his own instinctive movements. Quite unreserved, certainly, he never was again” (3).⁵ Symons characterizes Merimeé’s posture as a “habit of repressive irony” (xii–xiii). Pater adds that Merimeé could not seek solace in conventional belief. For most of us, even after religious belief is gone, “some relics of it remain—queries, echoes, reactions, after-thoughts,” a hazy, vaguely hopeful “mental atmosphere.” But, “Not so with Merimeé!” (4). The result is an “exaggerated art” that is “intense, unrelieved, an art of fierce colours” simultaneously “cold-blooded” and “impersonal” (15).⁶

Underlying all these assessments is a late-nineteenth-century notion that everyone is a boiling cauldron of emotion and insecurity. One can be true to himself and write like Swinburne; repress, and write like Tennyson; or hide behind irony and ironic masks, and write like Wilde.⁷ Stevens’ title suggests that the sequence evinces these characteristics of repressed passion, extremeness, and irony. Schulze and Sharpe find something 1890ish about “Sur Ma Guzzla Gracile” because they sensed the influence of Pater and Symons.

Bringing it all together, “Sur Ma Guzzla Gracile” is a sequence of poems by Stevens pretending to be Merimeé pretending to be an Italian translating into French prose the ballads of a Serbian *guslar* who is himself transmitting original and traditional folksongs that express the spirit of the people. This folk mentality, of course, is merely an overly educated, disillusioned perspective. The poems sacrifice the strategies of qualification typical of the later Stevens for the sake of clear extremes. The poems are spoken by a variety of narrators, yet they spring from a single passionate yet repressed consciousness. Given this complex transmission, it is easier to understand Stevens’ letter to Harriet Monroe, in which he reports being told of the “impression” that “the poems [of “Sur Ma Guzzla Gracile”] were hideous ghosts of [him]self.” “It may be,” he remarks enigmatically (L 222–23).

It is time, finally, to turn to the sequence proper. “Palace of the Babies” seems a much different poem in “Sur Ma Guzzla Gracile” than it does in *Collected Poems*, where it is sandwiched between “Anecdote of the Jar” and “Frogs Eat Butterflies. Snakes Eat Frogs. Hogs Eat Snakes. Men Eat Hogs.” For one thing, its main figure seems a particularly Paterian Merimeé. The disbelieving main figure walks outside the church, unmoved by the “hammered serafin” (CP 77), keenly aware of his loneliness. When conceptions come to him—this is the hidden pun of “babies,” which also calls to mind Goethe’s characterization of the ballads of *La Guzla* as Merimeé’s “‘clandestine children’ ” (qtd. in Lyon 52)—the figure ascribes their arrival not to divine afflatus but from the dark hints of mortality and solitude that accompany night. Coldly he walks on and pulls his hat over his eyes. In *Collected Poems*, we might be inclined to read this gesture as an acquiescence to empty darkness, but as the first poem of “Sur Ma Guzzla

Gracile," it seems rather like the creative gesture at the end of "Of the Surface of Things"⁸: the figure moves into his imagination, out of the gaze of others, and creates—as Merimeé did—not from reality, but out of his own "torment." His coldly passionate creating is indistinguishable from diffidence.

"Palace of the Babies" defines the imaginative activity of the implied author; the subsequent poems are his creations. Consonant with a fin-de-siècle version of Merimeé, the first four poems are a series of negations and ironies: Don Joost denies knowing anything but the failures of his own body; the ironically portrayed Doctor of Geneva rejects the sublimity of the sea, retreating to outdated ideas and the bourgeois city; the speaker of "Gubbinal" professes, ironically, to agree that "The world is ugly, / And the people are sad" (CP 85). All this leads up to the zero point in Stevens' corpus, "The Snow Man," which rejects everything that is not and affirms only "the nothing that is" (CP 10).

Every commentator who addresses the sequence is struck by the juxtaposition of the next poem, "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon." In "The Snow Man," the speaker finds himself to be "nothing," whereas in "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," he looks around and discovers that everything is Me: he is "the compass of [the] sea" and "the world in which [he] walked" (CP 65). A rather Cartesian logic governs the relationship between the two poems: once the perceiver has recognized that there is only nothing, the only subsequent affirmation he can make is that there is a mind making that recognition, which leads to the idealist proposition that the entire world is a creative product of that mind.

From this perspective, conceptualization is not impossible, as it is for the Doctor of Geneva and the Snow Man; it is unavoidable. The Cuban Doctor and the speaker of "Hibiscus on the Sleeping Shores" desire inaction but find themselves conceiving imaginatively. In this psyche-centric universe, it makes sense that the great crisis is not a world without meaning but—as in "Another Weeping Woman," "Of Heaven Considered as a Tomb," and implicitly in the "resignation" of "On the Manner of Addressing Clouds"—mortality. It also makes sense that the sequence's most serene poem, "The Load of Sugar-Cane," stresses continuity with no hint of danger to the self.

Merimeé's ghost appeared one more time in Stevens' corpus—in the last stanza of the 1930 poem "Annual Gaiety":

Père Guzz, in heaven, thumb your lyre
And chant the January fire
And joy of snow and snow. (OP 65)

Improbably situated in heaven (although it is worth noting Stevens also put Lytton Strachey there⁹), Merimeé is still playing his single-stringed

lute, and, in a gesture that is apparently half-mocking and half-sincere, composing poems that are passionate and cold.

To place Stevens' early excursion into—ahem—folk music in relief, it is useful to compare one other sequence title. The difference between Stevens' 1946 sequence, "More Poems for Liadoff," and "Sur Ma Guzzla Gracile" could hardly be greater. For one thing, the poems in the later sequence appear in the same order in *Collected Poems*, so there appears to have been no rethinking of the poems after they were written.¹⁰ Further, Anatoly Konstantinovich Lyadov is a relatively well-known composer who used folk materials in his most famous works: *Baba-Yaga*, *Kikimora*, and *The Enchanted Lake*. Stevens' record collection contained the last of these, as well as Opus 58, *Russian Folk Songs* (Stegman 89).

These are "more" tales for Lyadov because the sequence is meant as a continuation of the poem "Two Tales of Liadoff." In that poem, the speaker asserts, even long after the death of Lyadov, "There was no difference between the town / And him" (CP 347). In the later sequence, pastoral settings serve as a trope for a common experience that does *not* partake of the romance of the *Volk*: "A Woman Sings a Song for a Soldier Come Home" is set in a village; in "The Pediment of Appearance," there are young hunters who are oppressed (without knowing it) by an "ugly lord" (CP 361); "Burghers of Petty Death" features "the small townsmen of death" (CP 362); in "Mountains Covered with Cats," there is an "ancient tree / In the centre of its cones" (CP 367), even in Stalinist Russia. This sequence is too complex to discuss here, but the figure of Lyadov is apparently meant straightforwardly and without satire to stand for the educated artist who replicates and makes meaningful how people are feeling. Writing for or about a people contradicts the ironic, solipsistically aesthetic spirit of "Sur Ma Guzzla Gracile."

Although the two sequences could easily be used to help demonstrate the continuity in Stevens' poetry, since both deal with similar problems of epistemology and ontology, they differ fundamentally in point of view. The Great Depression and World War II had taught Stevens that catastrophe brought communal suffering and that poetry could have an important role in conceptualizing this experience. Although my ethical sense tells me I should prefer the latter sequence, I cannot help but feel nostalgia for the earlier one, which finds in alienation a freedom to pursue ideas wherever they lead, even to the zero point.

Assumption College

Notes

¹ Here is the order of the poems in "Sur Ma Guzzla Gracile" (in parenthesis next to the poem is the page the poem appears on in *The Collected Poems*): "Palace of the Babies" (77); "From the Misery of Don Joost" (46); "The Doctor of Geneva" (24);

"Gubbinal" (85); "The Snow Man" (9); "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon" (65); "The Cuban Doctor" (64); "Another Weeping Woman" (25); "Of the Manner of Addressing Clouds" (55); "Of ["On" in CP] Heaven Considered as a Tomb" (56); "The Load of Sugar-Cane" (12); "Hibiscus on the Sleeping Shores" (22).

² Bizet started *La Guzla de l'Emir* and then abandoned it to write *Les Pêcheurs de Perles*. There is a *guzla* in the opera, although its part is played by an oboe. Theodore Dubois eventually set the libretto of *La Guzla de l'Emir* to music, and Verdi's *Otello* has a scene where characters sing songs accompanied by a *guzla*, which is described rather inaccurately in the libretto as a kind of mandolin.

³ That is, *La Guzla, ou Choix de Poésies Illyriques Recueillies dans la Dalmatie, la Bosnie, La Croatie, et L'herzégovine*.

⁴ The preface is dated 1840.

⁵ This notion of Merimeé's inner self persists to this day. Raitt asserts, "He was always a painfully vulnerable man who had soon learnt to protect his sensitivity by building round it a shell of hard indifference. At the same time, his inner life craved the expression which he gave it through literature and a voluminous correspondence, thus producing the paradox of someone unable to resist the baring of his soul and yet ever anxious to avoid contacts which might bring his unbearable torments" (54). Sylvia Lyon quotes this passage approvingly.

⁶ Similarly, P. E. Charvet argues that Merimeé's corpus is full of tales of violent passion that paradoxically "make no concession to personal feeling" (221).

⁷ At the time Stevens was composing "Sur Ma Guzzla Gracile," this view of human nature still retained some force; it is in line with simple notions of Freud, for instance.

⁸ I am referring to the last two lines in "Of the Surface of Things," bearing in mind that the moon is one of Stevens' symbols of the imagination: "The singer has pulled his cloak over his head. / The moon is in the folds of the cloak" (CP 57).

⁹ See "Lytton Strachey, Also, Enters into Heaven" (OP 71-72).

¹⁰ Here is the order, followed by the page number in *Collected Poems*, of "More Tales for Liadoff": "A Woman Sings a Song for a Soldier Come Home" (CP 360); "The Pediment of Appearance" (CP 361); "Burghers of Petty Death" (CP 362); "Human Arrangement" (CP 363); "The Good Man Has No Shape" (CP 364); "The Red Fern" (CP 365); "From the Packet of Anacharsis" (CP 365); "The Dove in the Belly" (CP 366); "Mountains Covered with Cats" (CP 367); "The Prejudice against the Past" (CP 368); "Extraordinary References" (CP 369); "Attempt to Discover Life" (CP 370).

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Placing a Tree in “Anecdote of the Jar”

MASAHIKO ABE

I

FOLLOWING JONATHAN BATE'S influential *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991), which served as a counterstatement to the dominant new historical trend of the 1980s, many critics seem to have resumed their interest in the environmental elements in poetical texts, not only in the field of romanticism, where we have had specific issues of major academic journals dedicated to the topic, such as “Green Romanticism” (*Studies in Romanticism* 35.3 [1996]) and “Romanticism and Ecology” (*The Wordsworth Circle* 28.3 [Summer 1997]), but also in the studies of Wallace Stevens.

Gyorgyi Voros' *Notations of the Wild: Ecology in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (1997) is a case in point. Voros aims to transcend the old Nature/Culture dichotomy of her predecessors by asserting that Stevens is an ecological poet who, being alert to “the reality of physical Nature as nonhuman Other” (11), tries to construct a place—or “dwelling” to use a peculiarly Stevensian term—in which to activate human and nonhuman interactions (83). Such a manner of textual construction will challenge, as Carol H. Cantrell argues, “any easy dichotomy between language and world, the built environment and the natural environment, and, by implication, between the human activity of making and reality” (22).

“Anecdote of the Jar” is a poem that has typically accommodated the old dichotomy between language and the world. Yvor Winters once commented, against the readings of critics Stanley P. Chase and Howard Baker,

The jar is the product of the human mind, as the critics remark, and it dominates the wilderness; but it does not give order to the wilderness—it is vulgar and sterile, and it transforms the wilderness into the semblance of a deserted picnic ground. (94)

As can be seen, the critical focal point is very likely to settle on the power game between the jar and the wilderness, that is, the one between culture and nature, or art and nature. But what if we were to read a tree in the jar? This may sound slightly eccentric, but with the recent development of ecological criticism in mind, I would like to propose a new context for the

poem, a context in which the apparently man-made jar takes on the role of a tree. I shall first look into how the old culture/nature divide has evolved in the reading of the poem and then shift the focus to the tradition of tree poems, which Stevens, I shall argue, is negotiating within this text.

II

One obvious precursor to "Anecdote of the Jar" is John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." The point of the association does not merely lie in the appearance and function of the central object: a hollow container that can hold liquid. In both these texts, we witness a staggering silence of the objects, with a particular focus on their potential, or implicit, eloquence. The narrator in Keats's ode, who catches the "unheard music," is busily engaged in the act of envoicing, trying to let the urn speak out what it has to say. Similarly, Stevens' jar appears to be pregnant with unspoken words, even if misleadingly, and the whole poem is permeated with the sense of imminent verbal outflowing. Keats's ode is often discussed in the context of *ekphrasis*, a poetic representation of silent visual objects. W. J. T. Mitchell suggests that "Anecdote of the Jar" is another offspring of the genre, although it takes a much more challenging form, as it "offer[s] us a blank space where we expect a picture, a cipher in the place of a striking figure, a piece of refuse or litter where we look for art" (166). In Keats's ode, an act of transgression is committed in the division between verbal and visual arts when the narrator tries to let us hear the urn's unhearable music through his words. Stevens' version significantly revises Keats's ode at the end as the jar fails to "give of bird or bush" (CP 76). The jar rejects the Keatsean "cold pastoral" together with the famous final epigram—"Beauty is truth, truth beauty"—and ends up providing nothing verbal. Despite its revisional twist at the end, there is no denying that in "Anecdote of the Jar" verbal confrontation with a silent object constitutes the crux of the narrative tension. As Mitchell puts it, the poem "perfectly enact[s] the power of the ekphrastic image as intransigent Other to the poetic voice, its role as a 'black hole' in the text" (168).

Such a highlighting of the jar's silence will inevitably be paralleled by a formalist reading of the whole text, since, being called an anecdote, and having a single jar under focus, the poem itself bears the mark of an autonomous artwork. The text takes over the static artfulness of the jar and stands in front of us like a silent visual object. But, of course, the narrative starts off in a more experiential mode, "I placed a jar in Tennessee" (CP 76). This is where a second reading comes in. The poem does not only embody an ekphrastic encounter with what has already been there. Rather than being a mere struggle with the pastness of things, it makes things happen. The poem is an event, a history, or, using Frank Lentricchia's words, "a consequence of jar placing" (8). Indeed, the human agent quickly disappears after the initial jar-placing act. The mechanism is lucidly explained by Lentricchia:

the "I" who does the initial act of placing gets lost after the first line. The human actor becomes a panoramic onlooker, a distant voice, an innocent bystander: the jar takes on, somehow, an intentional life of its own: "I placed" but "It made" and "It took" and "It did not give." The jar did it. This jar, and the character of being possessed by any jar, are necessarily implicated with human activity, yet that fact is what is shunted aside after this poem's first line. (8)

But the human actor's disappearance is not absolute. What happened at the beginning continues to cast shadows. The human act upon the jar is carried out as a transitive operation—"I placed"—and this is followed by an equally transitive and dominating gesture of the jar—"It made the slovenly wilderness / Surround that hill." The jar, described with the intransitive "was" as a distant solitary figure in the second stanza—"The jar was round upon the ground / And tall and of a port in air"—is again endowed with an unmistakable capacity to influence others in the third stanza, where the verbs are again in the transitive mode—"It took dominion everywhere. / . . . It did not give of bird or bush" (CP 76). The jar is supposed to interact with and even transform the things that surround it.

In this second reading, "Anecdote of the Jar" is a narrative about an active subjective involvement with the other. The "I," who places the jar, works upon the jar and dominates the wilderness. The "I," who talks about his (or her) own jar-placing act, is part of a bigger enterprise, in which he brings about what he talks about. In Genesis, God said, "'Let there be light,' and there *was* light" (Gen. 1.3; emphasis added). In "Anecdote of the Jar," the narrator says, "I placed a jar," and it really was placed there. There is a strong sense of material consequentiality; verbal acts physically create things, actually make things happen.

The two readings reviewed so far seem to bring to light two conflicting elements within the poem. In the first reading, the narrative represents a failed attempt to let the jar speak the unspeakable, or rather to let the unspeakable jar speak out. By thus ostensibly failing to perform what it sets out to do, the poem actually achieves its goal. The jar has spoken, though not in the text. It is away "in Tennessee," "upon a hill," which no one has ever seen. Ekphrasis is a mode in which the unreachability of the object can be dramatically staged. In ekphrasis the living try to come to terms with the world they do not know, the world of the dead. It may prove impossible for the narrator to capture the object verbally, which, in that sense, remains to be absent from the text; but it is this negative materiality that gives a presence to the object in question. The narrator of "Anecdote of the Jar" is acutely aware of such a boundary between the verbal and the visual, or the living and the dead, a dividing line that will never allow one to cross over to another genre of representation. Although less insecure as a speaker than the one in "Ode on a Grecian Urn," he realizes

that, after all, he cannot bring to birth the object by himself. All he can do is to let it emerge on its own.

But does he really give up? Does not he also understand that every act he performs, every word he speaks, takes on a certain ineradicable physicality? In our second reading, the emphasis is on the actuality of the narrative. Following J. L. Austin's model, we may call it a performative act, in which what is said is more than a mere statement; the words act upon the world with force. That the announcement of the jar-placing act marks the onset of a nexus of events shows how things are ordered in "Anecdote of the Jar": the words and things interact with each other, the former being no less physical than the latter. Hence there seems to be no ontological difference among various modes of existence, and even the verbal and the visual, or the living and the dead, can cross the line that divides them.

The two readings may not be mutually exclusive, but I think they will appear even more integral to each other if we introduce a third context for the poem, a context of tree poems. It is no coincidence that in Walt Whitman's "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing," the initial act of seeing is immediately followed by a place-name.

I saw in Louisiana a live-oak growing,
All alone stood it and the moss hung down from the
branches,
Without any companion it grew there uttering joyous
leaves of dark green. . . . (126)

The place had to be mentioned because what is discovered is the tree's rootedness. The phallic connotation is manifest from the beginning with its emphasis on the tree's solitary energy, but more important the plant is physically bound to where it grows, and this immobility prompts the narrative "I" to break off a twig, a crucial infliction of violence, to bring it away. We know that the live oak stands for Whitman's former self, the self he possessed before he fell in love with a man, which is why the tree is made to belong to a distant place both in terms of time and space; its liveliness is to be captured only indirectly, that is, in the reduced form of "a curious token" (127) and in the civilized setting of a private room in a remote region that is probably not Louisiana, as Alan Helms has argued. The tree belongs to the past, not only because time has elapsed since the narrator lost his former identity, but also because it grows in another world.

In *Romantic Ecology*, Bate traces how a reference to place has an important function in Wordsworth's work, since for him "poetry has its origins in memorial inscription" and "such poetry of mortality is a guarantor of immortality" (86). According to Wordsworth, the epitaphic tradition is clearly distinguishable from the oral one, and the former tradition that "serves to sanctify a place and to preserve the memory of a person has its origins in burial practice" (87). Bate explains:

Every culture has monuments to its dead; and, as Wordsworth says, "As soon as nations had learned the use of letters, epitaphs were inscribed upon these monuments." The epitaph, the monumental inscription, is the earliest form of written poetry, perhaps one of the earliest forms of any kind of writing. It is the root of that kind of poetry which we call "lyric," which is written, which comes from strong feeling, which serves to memorialize and monumentalize people and places, and which we associate especially with the "Romantic" tradition in which Wordsworth is pre-eminent. (87)

"Louisiana," in Whitman's piece, seems to be essential in elevating the narrator's mundane seeing of a live oak to a singular lyric act, thereby elevating that particular tree to his symbolic double. Meanwhile, "Tennessee," in Stevens' anecdote, when mentioned at the end of the first line, is similarly given prominence—"I placed a jar *in Tennessee*"—but this is not without a bewildering discord of scales, since it is hard to put an anonymous jar and Tennessee within a convincing narrative perspective. The bewilderment also comes from our suspicions about the jar, that is, our questioning of the legitimacy of the anonymous jar's rise to an object of commemoration. As we move on, however, what stands on the top of a hill and subjugates the wilderness around it increasingly looks like something worth monumentalizing. With Whitman's poem in mind, we can read a process of transformation in this emergence of a monument. The jar is turned into a tree. The jar is portable and round, but the placing act roots it to a particular spot, where the jar takes on authority and grows tall. Significantly, "It did not give of bird or bush"; the suggestion is that one is tempted to imagine its giving of bird or bush because of the pastoral association. By this stage the object is very un-jar-like, except that it is a jar.

Thus, Stevens' anecdote can be seen as an attempt to create a lyric moment out of place, or out of placing. But it comes in the form of a verbal announcement, "I placed," a performative gesture in the vein of "Let there be light," and this seems to suggest that, fundamentally, the whole text is designed as a testing ground of how close a narrative can get to God. It is the will power of the narrative agent that is explored. To what extent can a verbal agent initiate an action, or act upon the physical world with the force of his words? Can such an agent really be in control of what one is linguistically engaged in? These questions have to be answered in light of the jar's growth: does it evolve into something that it is not at the beginning? My answer is "yes." This evolution is even more pronounced because, while in Whitman the lively tree is turned into a less animate token, in Stevens the inanimate jar gains life.

But, as our first reading suggests, Stevens' jar/tree does not really achieve a full form of life due to its enigmatic reticence. Indeed, despite

hints of movement on a large scale (“It made the slovenly wilderness / Surround that hill, / The wilderness rose up to it, / And sprawled around”), the poem is curiously imbued with silence. The jar may have gained life, but it stops short of acquiring the status of a human, unlike Stevens’ “giant” or “major man.”

This seems to reveal another side of the jar/tree complex. If, as Wordsworth says, lyric has its origin in a monumental inscription at the burial place, it is not surprising that trees often serve as an ideal figure for an epitaph or a tombstone, as in his poem “The Thorn”:

“There is a Thorn—it looks so old,
In truth, you’d find it hard to say
How it could ever have been young,
It looks so old and grey.
Not higher than a two years’ child
It stands erect, this aged Thorn;
No leaves it has, no prickly points;
It is a mass of knotted joints,
A wretched thing forlorn.
It stands erect, and like a stone
With lichens is it overgrown.” (240–41)

A tree can transcend our time scale and signal eternity—“you’d find it hard to say / How it could ever have been young, / It looks so old and grey” —while its upright trunk and limbs also suggest human transience with a hint of vulnerability—“A wretched thing forlorn.” Trees can at once tell *about* the dead and *be* the dead. They stand in the borderline area between the dead and the living and are made to speak the language of the dead. In doing so, the tree has to put on the mask of the dead (“gray and bare”), even if it is alive.

Because of its longevity and its resulting prevalence in churchyards as guardian of the dead, yew-trees are particularly fit to provide a vehicle for voices from another world. In Wordsworth’s “Yew-Trees,” the description of the site of the four yew-trees called “fraternal Four of Borrowdale” ends with an imagined scene where “Fear and trembling Hope, / Silence and Foresight; Death the Skeleton / And Time the Shadow” meet for a ritual ceremony:

there to celebrate,
As in a natural temple scattered o’er
With altars undisturbed of mossy stone,
United worship; or in mute repose
To lie, and listen to the mountain flood
Murmuring from Glaramara’s inmost caves. (210)

The assemblage of four yew-trees thus creates a space for a communication, not an ordinary one, but one that takes one back to the celestial source of life, a place from which Wordsworthian blissful water flows.

In the form of such a burial inscription, the trees help one listen to the language of the dead. In Stevens, the jar keeps its silence till the end. Its hollow shape may either be a grotesque caricature of a mouth that has lost its words, or an idealized form of an ear that is always ready to listen. Yew-trees may be believed to live for hundreds of years to guard the dead, but in the American context they are something to be transplanted or "placed," like a jar. Stevens' jar, standing not like a yew-tree in a vale but like a monument "tall and of a port in air," is inevitably ambiguous about its way of communication with the dead, refusing to be a mouthpiece for words from another world. But it is not without sympathy for the absent, or the strangers, especially because it is itself "Like nothing else in Tennessee."

Thus, a reading of "Anecdote of the Jar" in the light of tree poems reveals the jar's potential root in the natural world. The placing act can now be seen as an ambiguous combination of a conservationist's practical interference and a romantic effort to rebuild the lost paradise.

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Poems

Poem for W. S.[†]

The clouds of dissipation hang like wars
in the peaceful sky of my heart's-ease;
the warning birds of wisdom let fall the stars
of their cries in the midst of escaping streets.

The winds of will confabulate,
the clouds grow blacker as if choking;
children gesticulate like toys
at the guns of weather joking.

When my nerves' rain inhabits me,
the salt birds of the brain will melt,
the wind will trickle to the ground,
and underneath the violent tree

the dead cat will be found,
whose eyes looked out from every pore,
and buried like the bone of lust
by children who never mourned before.

Charles Henri Ford
New York, N.Y.

[†] Ford, who died September 27, 2002, was the editor of the surrealist magazine *View* (1940–47) and had published an interview with Stevens ("Verlaine in Hartford") in the first issue, along with "Materia Poetica" (aphorisms later titled "Adagia" in *Opus Posthumous*). He published more "Materia Poetica" in 1942 and Stevens' poem "Analysis of a Theme" in 1945. This unpublished poem (c. 1940s) was found among his papers by Eric La Prade, Ford's literary and photography archivist.

Seaside Sestina

—After *Sea Surface Full of Clouds*

The morning beach grows white from a world of black
Like a spreading flower beside the ocean's blue.
The wetter sand is sodden, mealy gray,
But with sun, umbrellas sprout vivid green.
By noon their shadows seem a torrid brown.
By one o'clock the sea's a screaming red.

The horizon fills with sails of yellow and red.
The terns make whizzing lines of white and black.
Along the surf the sanderlings run on brown,
Quick legs and bounce their beaks in rushing blue
Water to gather morsels silver green
While gulls swing up grandly on wings of gray.

By two the sun is sunk behind the gray
Pearl of afternoon sky, and skin, now red,
Turns cool from winds like avocado's green
Juice on the tongue. Now sullen clouds of black
Roll over the towering hotels of blue
And beige and change the beach to wistful brown.

Then by three the sudden sun subdues the brown
Tints and high tide comes in no longer gray
But bright turquoise and a vibrant deeper blue.
Yet tired eyes may rebel, the books are read,
And sleep may come in the soft, central black,
Of mid-afternoon in those serene and green

Shelters by the sea. Now also green,
The distant waves in changing light lick brown
Hulls of shrimp boats where men cast nets of black
Into the wide-eyed water to pull the gray
Crustaceans aboard, stretching their red
Arms and swinging their load beneath the blue

Sky's searing sun. The wind that blew
Our bodies clean has died. The enveloping green
Water brings no relief from the fierce red
Circle of the sun. But by six the brown,
Long pools of shadows drink the white and gray
Feathers of gulls and turn the pelicans black.

Though blue the evening, darkening water is brown
As by green palms the beach appears ash gray.
At last red sails are lost in shades of black.

Fred Hill
St. Marys, Ga.

Solstice Over the Valdarno

that ambrosial latitude

—Stevens

Sunday solstice. Topmost sky awash in backlit blue,
then the blood-orange above the western ridge,
then the olive-black serration of hills—

and lower, the tiny lights of Figline
flickering on like breeze-blown candles
in the old cemetery in Florence—

and closest,
below our stone villa, a twine of smoke
above S. Michele, the late Renaissance church we visited
in sunlight as secular as the rented Renault
two days back. Now dusk, emergent
as another world I'd abandoned long ago.

Here at sunset

I'm joined by a voice unfurling beauty
from the sky and earth, from the long-dead
and my own nostalgia
for Catholic endlessness—

.....

As I sit among family, a constant query
whispers the terms of an argument.

Miles west
of our table of broken dolci and emptied cups
the sunset plays on for hours.

Grandmother
has just told the story of British cousin Douglas,
how one formal dinner he made the men
rotate one seat clockwise after every course,
the seated women welcoming each new partner,
how the stunned host,

.....

In Castelfranco, the evocation of these darkening terraces
is like an errant history
I'm pressed to revise.

In the quarter light
of the moonless dusk, not pigeons' song, not distant train,
nothing but fireflies flaring on in airborne silence,
like me,
up here on a mountain, waiting for calm. What I need up here,
alone at the picnic table in my insistent musing,
is old Douglas: Time to rotate, change
the conversation, mix in
a few laughs. I'd like to agree—

But out in the altitudes of the Valdarno,
the silence
merely raises an eyebrow, shrugs, says,
I'm at the next chair, then the next,
and
I'll talk about anything, whatever you like . . .

Kevin Clark
San Luis Obispo, Calif.

The Denial of Death

No robins stood juxtaposed to the pink peonies. No children played
in the stout grass, free of dandelions. No ornate frame surrounded
the scene, just white pine. The real house was full of children
when the painting was in its infancy. In the artist's statement, nothing
was said of the renovations from the previous year. On other walls
were portraits of similar scenes, all something other than they appeared.

A man, in a tan suit, was reminded of home. A slender woman thought
that she might have lived in one of those houses. Oh, how far the heart
will travel to have what it wants! In a grade school gym, men are asking
women to dance to swing music as inexpensive lights move along the
walls.

The dark is not far off. Beside each streak of light is a splotch of
darkness.

Beside each dancer is something other than they are imagining as their
eyes

move from partner to partner. There is a hierarchy to desire, the legs of jitterbuggers pointing frenetically at the floor. The landscape before the light of day is the kind of blue that the vocalist has in his heart.

Joggers make their way alongside busses ferrying people to the hospitals
bunched around the university. They are not as lonely as they look. The blue keeps them. The day turns mauve, like a mood ring changing its hues. It's useless to begin anew unless all the world were heartache, unless we had to get it right this time. Robins search the lawns for worms
as if their survival depended on it, as if this were something other than living.

Anthony Butts
Pittsburgh, Pa.

Something with Nothing in It

Bestowing equity, the emperor of ice-cream
dicks both fact and pattern;
checks from the Kingdomcome will come
and bounce: the character missing between the words
walked with its grudge away from the page.
This desertion has never been measured;
to do so would diddle the clock and patience
of a docile piece of wood, the pencil
or ruler of youth, eager
in any hand for every abuse.
We sit with itself at the side of an empty road,
invisible both to ourselves and the traffic
we have never seen or heard.
Curbed by this chattering shackle of noise,
the activity chosen to sponsor the props,
the only motion away
is the passing of a center-running length
of freshly painted double-yellow line;
dice and the hours tossed forth come back:
we are waiting for something that isn't
to empty something with nothing in it.

D. G. Zorich
Escondido, Calif.

Reviews

The Idea of a Colony: Cross-culturalism in Modern Poetry.

By Edward Marx. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004.

In his introduction to *The Idea of a Colony*, Edward Marx identifies his project as an examination of the relationship between the cultural and the personal, specifically between imperialism and modernist writers' fascination with the primitive and the exotic. While taking account of post-colonial theory, Marx voices concern that the Foucauldian "*discursive strategies*" of primitivism and exoticism be understood in terms of a more unifying "underlying structural principle," which he finds in psychology—especially Jungian analytic psychology although he also draws on Freud, on post-Freudian object relations theory, and on Lacan where they seem more illuminating (6–7). He further notes: "Although I expect readers to regard these diagnoses sceptically, I hope to draw attention to their potential usefulness as an aid in structuring and developing interpretative hypotheses" (11).

Methodologically, this indifference as to whether or not readers find his psychological diagnoses persuasive poses some problems for Marx's interpretation of British, American, and colonial modernist poetry as fueled by or exemplifying personal and cultural repression. First, Marx mixes psychological theories as they seem best reflected in the poems he examines, but at the same time he seems not to want to make a case for one or another theory as an account of the psyche. Since imperialism—British and American—at times becomes a backdrop for the book's more careful psychological analyses, one would think the psychology used should bear more weight. Second, although there is interesting historical information embedded in each chapter, apparently universal psychic structures or stages of repression are found to underlie most cultural or historical structures. For example, in his discussion of Pound's version of Li Po's version of "The River-Merchant's Wife," Marx notes: "All poetry, perhaps, by pulling the sign back to its acoustical materiality through the emphasis on sound and rhythm, exerts a regressive pull toward the maternal substrate of language" (113). One thus wants to know more about why the "shadow of primitivism" and imperialism's "opposing force," exoticism—"the main forms of cross-culturalism"—are features specific to British and American modernist writing rather than to more global truths in the "Jungian cultural studies" Marx proposes (13, 12). Finally, one misses at times the cultural specificity of the psychological mechanisms proposed in studies such as those by Michael North (whose work is cited here) or Michael Rogin or Jackson Lears (whose books are not mentioned).

Three of the ten short chapters of Marx's book focus on relatively unfamiliar writers: the British poets James Elroy Flecker and Violet Nicolson (born Adela Florence Cory, daughter of a colonel in the Bengal Army, who published as Laurence Hope) and Sarojini Naidu (born in Hyderabad, who attended Cambridge as well as the University of Madras). Most of *The Idea of a*

Colony, however, revisits familiar figures: Kipling, Brooke, Pound, Tagore, Eliot, Stevens, and (in a final chapter) the writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Although the book concentrates not so much on modernism's others as on its fascination with the other figured as primitive or exotic, it is surprising to find writers associated with the Harlem Renaissance (James Weldon Johnson, Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Countee Cullen, among others) treated as a group and given less attention than the more mainstream figures to whom whole chapters are devoted. Indeed, since *The Idea of a Colony* focuses primarily on psychological analysis, treating groups of poets is in itself a bit puzzling. The final chapter does examine a "'coon song'" about a "'Zulu from Matabooloo'" collaboratively written by brothers James Weldon and John Rosamond Johnson with Bob Cole, pointing out "the song's blithe repression of [South African] political realities, compared to which its Oedipal repressions seem trivial" (165, 167). Yet the chapter concludes with a reading of Countee Cullen's "Heritage," where we are told that the "African scene [a "primal scene"] may be identified with the mother's body: the Thing from which the poet is removed, the Thing the father loves," even though we have almost no information about Cullen's biography (174–75). In other words, the book's treatment of the relationship between others and colonists and between psychology and history is sometimes troubling.

The longest chapter in *The Idea of a Colony* is on Wallace Stevens and, as the book's title would suggest, particularly on "The Comedian as the Letter C." Unlike Eliot or Pound, who are said to be oblivious to the psychoanalytic significance of their poems (99, 134), on Marx's account most of Stevens' writing shows his "attempt to grasp the mechanisms and sources of personality" (139). Arguing that the primitive and the exotic especially inform Stevens' "psychological poetics," which anticipate the theories of Lacan (15), and calling "The Comedian" both Stevens' "first great effort at self-analysis" (138) and Crispin's use of "poetry-as-therapy" (156), Marx takes the poem section by section and traces its "developmental narrative" (142) in Lacanian and Stevensian terms. There are many interesting moments, as when—following the earlier argument in his less psychologically grounded essay featured in *The Wallace Stevens Journal* (1994)—Marx rehearses others' interpretations of the Maya sonneteers who appear in "The Comedian," an image persuasively identified as overdetermined, even while earlier readings of the Mayans as literary precursors are said to "miss the point" (145), namely that Stevens' interest in Mayans had to do with U.S. nationalism and a widespread preoccupation with an indigenous American literary tradition as well as with introverted feelings and, ultimately, with "the father, the one who *may*, the *you* who *can* (or perhaps *can't*) possess the mother" (147). Occasionally it is unclear whether the argument features Crispin as thinly veiled autobiography or as Stevens' working out of a pre-Lacanian theory of personality—whether we have Stevens' anticipation of Lacan or a Lacanian reading of Stevens. Although these need not be antithetical gestures, it can be disorienting when at times we are focused on "Crispin's ongoing self-analysis," while at other times we are told how "Stevens's conception of the real closely parallels Lacan's" and that "Stevens cannot finally dissolve the exotic and primitive projections

that have become an inseparable part of *his* psychological economy" (156, 143, 162; emphases added).

Periodically, then, the underlying psychological principles deployed in *The Idea of a Colony* rest uneasily with or threaten to render moot the cultural analyses offered. Moreover, in the psychoanalytic treatments of poems there are moments where it seems the book could have drawn on others' work, for example on Mary Nyquist's Lacanian reading of early Stevens or even John Fletcher's early writings on poetry and primal fantasy. Nonetheless, there are rewarding moments of both psychological insight and of recovered cultural history—especially in the careful treatment of "The Comedian as the Letter C"—that Stevens scholars should find useful, if at times provocative.

Lisa M. Steinman
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Someone's Road Home: Questions of Home and Exile in American Narrative Poetry.

By Gregory Dowling. Udine: Campanotto Editore, 2003.

Gregory Dowling makes a sound case in *Someone's Road Home* for the narrative tradition in American poetry. A lecturer at the University of Venice and the author of a series of successful sleuth novels, he has been influenced by the New Formalists and contends that, whereas the still canonical modernist poetics emphasizes disjunction and free forms, there is an equally strong strain characterized by narrative and regular forms. Following Dana Gioia's chapter in *The Columbia History of American Poetry* (1993), Dowling sees Longfellow as a tireless experimenter and offers in Chapter 1 a sympathetic and convincing reading of *Evangeline* as an underrated poem of waste and exile. He then argues that Melville, rediscovered in the modernist era, still awaits a just appreciation for his grandiose *Clarel*, even though Melville himself deemed it "eminently adapted for unpopularity" (21). Its "hardness and roughness" should make it the more attractive to modernist critics, undaunted by the "abstruse boulders" (22) of works like *The Cantos* or *A*, but this has not been the case, perhaps because *Clarel* (subject of Dowling's Ch. 2) makes *too much* sense, and very bleak sense at that. This pessimistic narrative tradition is continued by Robinson and by Frost, whose late manifesto "Directive" provides Dowling's title. We remember that in this poem the speaker invites us up a mountain path to a deserted village and finally to a spring that is still flowing; he challenges us to "Drink and be whole again beyond confusion." By losing our way we find it, by contemplating the decay of human habitation we reach our "unique and solitary home" (CP 512).

Dowling does not quote this line from "The Poem that Took the Place of a Mountain," but concentrates in Chapter 3 ("Good, Fat, Guzzly Fruit") on Wallace Stevens' most determined narrative effort, "The Comedian as the Letter C." He notes that Stevens' more eminent critics have been tepid toward "The Comedian." Stevens is mostly seen as the poet of bareness and depletion, and

so readers are troubled by the unashamed (howbeit self-ironical) eroticism and sensuality of "The Comedian"—and by the very notion of comedy: "earth was like a jostling festival / Of seeds grown fat, too juicily opulent, / Expanding in the gold's maternal warmth" (CP 32). Dowling sees here a parody of the opening of Keats's "Ode to Autumn": "The gourds and shells in Stevens's version have swollen to bursting-point, spilling their clammy sweetness; it may not be good for Crispin's poetry, but Stevens himself is luxuriating in supremely sensuous *jouissance* with this juicily jostling excess" (72).

Dowling also notes a possible echo in the description of the sea of Browning's "Aristophanes' Apology": "What if thy watery plural vastitude, / Rolling unanimous advance, had rushed, / Might upon might, a moment,—stood, one stare, / Sea-face to city-face, thy glaucous wave / Glassing that marbled last magnificence. . . ." (69). Such comparisons are useful because if we do not remember the tumultuous language of Browning, we may think that "The Comedian" is straight out of the Elizabethans, rather than the late romantics. I think one can read this baroque tour de force as the story of a poet in quest of a subject ("Scrawl a tragedian's testament? Prolong / His active force in an inactive dirge. . . ." [CP 41]). In this it is very similar to Ezra Pound's rejected "Three Cantos" of 1917, also much indebted to Browning: "What's left for me to do? / Whom shall I conjure up; who's my Sordello . . . ?" (*Poetry* 10.3 [1917]: 117).

In Part IV, Crispin answers his questions by pronouncing that "his soil is man's intelligence" (CP 36). One has only to speak of one's environment. Dowling refers to proponents of ecology such as Jonathan Bate (*The Song of the Earth*), and quotes Wendell Berry, who writes: "I am endlessly in need of the work of poets who have been concerned with living in place, the life of a place, long-termed attention and devotion to a settled home and its natural household, and hence to the relation between imagination and language and a place" (10). Yet Stevens will not allow himself to be cornered. On the famous passage beginning "The man in Georgia waking among pines / Should be pine-spokesman," Dowling comments: "Stevens here makes witty play on stereotypes, indicating the risk of rigid formulae in such succinct phrases as 'the banjo's categorical gut.' There is little hope of spontaneity, if banjo-playing becomes topographically obligatory" (74).

Hence Crispin's return to the real ("The plum survives its poem"): "Just as the lady of 'Sunday Morning' is brought to realise the deadliness of an unchanging paradise, . . . so Crispin is brought to renounce his notion of an enduring poetry of 'Loquacious columns' in favour of the fruits of this world, which are enduring in their passing" (75). In the end no moral can be drawn from Crispin's progress—"Or rather, it seems to offer the conclusion that the only possible relation to the world must be a shifting one" (77). Dowling also comments usefully on the poem's curt conclusion, "So may the relation of each man be clipped," hinting "at a return to Crispin's original vocation as barber." But the line is ironic and "supremely resistant to simplification. . . . There can be no real 'clipping,' whether of relations in the sense of stories, relations in the sense of connections with other people, or relations in the sense of family-members. Stories, connections and families will continue to thrive and to self-generate" (76–77). So home remains elusive for Crispin as

for the other poets that Dowling discusses, claiming a relation between the desire for narrative and consistency and “the difficulty of establishing firm and settled ties to the land” (10).

After an ample and rewarding discussion of “What Robert Frost Means by Home” (Ch. 4), Dowling turns his attention in the final chapters to Anthony Hecht’s *The Venetian Vespers* and Vikram Seth’s *The Golden Gate*, brilliant and humane works that show that the American narrative poem is very much alive and resourceful. Dowling brings to these works a scholar’s attention, guided by the passion of a reader speaking to other readers. Thus he performs a very useful function, guiding us to primary and secondary works and instituting a dialogue between literature and the world at large and its ideas. Though his study makes no claim of comprehensiveness, the pattern that he discerns in the carpet makes a welcome contribution to our reading of American poetry. “The open road and home are the two competing poles of attraction for the American artist” (77).

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Wallace Stevens: De mooiste van Wallace Stevens. [The Most Beautiful (Poems) by Wallace Stevens.]

Trans. into Dutch by Peter Nijmeijer. Ed. Koen Stassijns and Ivo van Strijtem. Intro. Bart Eeckhout. Herentals: Lannoo/Atlas, 2003.

Since the appearance in 1997 of the first book-length collection of Wallace Stevens translations into Dutch (*Wallace Stevens: Een blauwdruk voor de zon: The Man with the Blue Guitar; Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, by Rein Bloem), it has taken another six years for a second such collection to come out. Unfortunately, because the new book is part of a cheaply produced and popular series, it has turned out to be perfectly ignorable in the Dutch and Flemish press. This is too bad, for the new translations are clearly superior to their much more publicized predecessors.

The masterminds behind the series in which the current collection appears are two Belgian enthusiasts, Koen Stassijns and Ivo van Strijtem, who are themselves poets as well as sometime translators. Several years ago, they convinced two publishers (one Flemish, one Dutch) to join forces in supporting a series of major international poets in translation. The idea was to produce affordable, if handsomely and carefully executed, pocketbooks in which the best poetry translators would be invited to have a go at some of the major writers, with academic experts providing general introductions. Every volume was to be entitled, rather cloyingly, *The Most Beautiful* [of]. To everybody’s surprise, the formula became an instant commercial success. The miniature format and bargain price certainly had something to do with this. Although the books all come in hardback and sport a reading ribbon, they are literally pocket-size: at less than 4.5 x 7 inches, they look similar to Everyman’s Library Pocket Poets. To cut the cost, every booklet tops at 160 pages.

Stevens is already the fourteenth writer in the series, yet he is only the second American poet so far and only the third in English. He follows in the footsteps of Yeats and Dickinson, as well as of an unsystematic bunch consisting of Goethe, Tagore, Heine, Brecht, Neruda, Alberti, Petrarca, Ungaretti, Hesse, Södergran, and Hikmet. (Coming up are Whitman and Shakespeare, and maybe Frost. I have myself suggested Marianne Moore only to find her dismissed, astonishingly, as too little known.)

For those aware of my own forthcoming collection of translations (permissions still pending), I should probably clarify we are talking about different books here. In fact, when the editors of the series invited me to write an introduction to their Stevens volume, they had no idea my own pipeline was overflowing with translations nor that these were scheduled to appear with one of their two publishers, Atlas. At that point, they had already hired the much-respected Dutch poet and translator Peter Nijmeijer to do the translations. Fortunately, our joint publisher saw no reason to retract support from either project.

The selection for this volume was done by the translator himself and was determined by two principal factors: first, because Rein Bloem's 1997 collection had already included "The Man with the Blue Guitar" and "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," it seemed better to focus on other texts; second, the bilingual format of the series (original poems on the left, translations on the right) and the limited number of pages made it difficult to include more than a few long poems without sacrificing diversity. So Nijmeijer settled for principally short lyrics, the only two relative exceptions being "Sunday Morning" and "Variations on a Summer Day."

The fifty-one selected poems are presented chronologically per volume (though not within each volume). *Harmonium* and *Parts of a World* are best represented, with thirteen poems each. *Ideas of Order* is still good for ten selections, but the rest of Stevens' career is illustrated more erratically through only four poems from *Transport to Summer*, only one from *The Auroras of Autumn*, six from *The Rock*, and four from *Opus Posthumous*. Nobody will want to argue that this particular distribution—or the paucity of long poems—really reflects and sums up Stevens' "most beautiful" work, but by now few readers will be deluded by the standard title of the series into thinking otherwise. There are, to be sure, one or two poems with which one might want to quarrel because they can hardly be said to show Stevens on top of his game or do not lend themselves well to being translated. Thus, "Gray Stones and Gray Pigeons" tends to fall flat when one is unable to retain, as here, the highly self-conscious fun with the rhymes. But this does nothing to affect the high overall quality of the selection.

It is much more difficult, obviously, to come up with satisfying translations. This is where the real praise for this book is due. Peter Nijmeijer may not be an academic with an extensive knowledge of Stevens' life, history, and works, but he is himself a published poet as well as a major translator of poetry and plays, and he has three decades of experience under his belt. Among many others he has translated Celan, Ponge, Albee, and Heaney. (In his own poetry, he is known as a keen, no-frills observer with an interest in landscapes

and a strong ear for voices.) Unavoidably, his lack of specific expertise about Stevens led him to commit a few factual errors at one point, but I was able to signal these at the proofreading stage, when the translations were first being sent to me. Besides several faulty transcriptions in the original poems, I detected some clear mistakes: Nijmeijer was for instance unaware that Haddam was an actual place-name and had modified the spelling to sound better in Dutch; and, never having seen the spectacle of an aurora borealis in our part of the world, he mistook *The Auroras of Autumn* (whose title only of the volume he was including) to refer to an early morning sunrise rather than to the northern lights Stevens intended. My corrections were accepted in good cheer, and thanks to the high quality of the translations overall I was able to suppress the urge to interfere in more personal interpretative matters.

There can be no doubt Nijmeijer did a much better job than his predecessor, Rein Bloem, even if his approach is somewhat less literal than my own, which is steeped in the many things I have learned from criticism about Stevens. Thus, Nijmeijer is more willing than I am to sacrifice metrical effects or sudden spurts of rhyme. He sometimes reorganizes enjambments for the mere sake of line length and has a tendency to “normalize” punctuation where Stevens seems merely nonchalant or too lavish with commas. Occasionally, he will straighten out lexical and syntactical oddities. But if he takes such small liberties (and they are never glaring), he always does so with the elegant assurance of an experienced poet and translator and with an eye to sounding more appealing and idiomatic in Dutch. This makes for poems that sometimes diverge more than is necessary from the originals reprinted on the left-hand page; and in the absence of any translator’s notes (for which there is no room), we are left to guess at why they do so. But it also means that the poems have all the power of their autonomous appeal in Dutch. In other words, nobody can read the poems in Nijmeijer’s translation without being thoroughly impressed by the poetic genius of Stevens, which is of course the whole point of the exercise.

Translating is always the art of losing—of losing well, of losing as little, as intelligently, and as gracefully as possible. It is the art of waving adieu, adieu, adieu to the unique inimitability of the original poem. But admirers of these original poems often underestimate to what extent translating may also be the art of gaining, certainly in the case of a poet as multifaceted as Stevens. In this, the activity simply partakes of the art of metamorphosis Stevens himself so deeply invested in. If the most rewarding poetry, like the supreme fiction, must change, one of the ways it can do so is by morphing into another language. And if it must give pleasure, then in the hands of someone like Peter Nijmeijer it finds novel ways of doing so. His beautiful collection widens the horizon of Dutch poetry readers by reminding us that “To discover . . . to find, / Not to impose . . . / It is possible, possible” (CP 403–04). I tip my hat to Nijmeijer for bringing back so much of the genius of Wallace Stevens, all the way from Hartford to Holland.

Bart Eeckhout
Ghent University, Belgium

News and Comments

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Helen Vendler delivered the prestigious Jefferson lecture in Washington, D.C., on May 6, 2004, choosing Wallace Stevens for her subject in a lecture entitled "The Ocean, the Bird, and the Scholar." The Jefferson Lecture was established in 1972 as the highest honor the federal government bestows for distinguished intellectual and public achievement in the humanities. Previous lecturers include Arthur Miller, Toni Morrison, Gwendolyn Brooks, Walker Percy, Saul Bellow, Robert Penn Warren, and Lionel Trilling.

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A commemorative broadside from the April 2004 conference at the University of Connecticut, "Celebrating Wallace Stevens," is still available for \$35 (\$25 for students). Designed and executed by Sutton Hoo Press, the broadside features the last stanza of "Sunday Morning" and may be obtained from Charles Mahoney, English Department, University of Connecticut, 215 Glenbrook Road, Storrs, CT 06269. Checks should be made payable to the University of Connecticut/Wallace Stevens Conference.

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The British recognized WS with a conference entitled simply "Wallace Stevens." Celebrating the 50th anniversary of the *Collected Poems*, the Institute of English Studies at the School of Advanced Study, London University, hosted the conference on July 26–27 at Senate House. Helen Vendler was the keynote speaker, and papers were presented by Krzysztof Ziarek, Tim Armstrong, David Herd, Mark Ford, Edward Ragg, and Bart Eeckhout. The conference was organized by Josh Cohen of Goldsmiths College (London University).

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The ninth annual WS Birthday Bash was held at the Hartford Public Library on Saturday, Oct. 2, 2004, from 6:30–10 p.m. The guest speaker was Eugene Gaddis of the Wadsworth Atheneum, who presented his paper "The Life of the Imagination: Wallace Stevens and Chick Austin." Hors d'oeuvres, wine, live music, champagne, and birthday cake enlivened this celebration of Stevens' 125th birthday.

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David Smith's one-act play *Wallace Stevens at Key West*, commissioned by Live Arts Peninsula Foundation, will be produced at Ruth Eckerd Hall in Clearwater, Florida, with three performances in early February 2005. The play has been described as "an imaginary encounter between the poet and his muse."

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Jeanne Ruddy Dance, Philadelphia's contemporary dance company, presented the world premiere of "Out of the Mist, Above the Real" in June. Taking its title from Stevens' poem "The Irish Cliffs of Moher," the dance expresses a search for one's past.

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Dance and WS were paired again in June, when twelve-year-old Pennsylvania student Kelsey McDonald won the Wallace Stevens Chapter award for her poem on dance, called "Feel the Music."

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The 7th Annual Wallace Stevens Memorial Poetry Reading was held in Elizabeth Park in the Pond House on June 19th at 1 p.m. to coincide with the Rose Festival. Vivian Shipley and Hugh Ogden read their poetry.

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In January, the Chicago Symphony debuted a composition entitled "At the Exactest Point," based on a line from "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," written by composer and Brigham Young University Dean Stephen Jones.

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Stevens items appeared several times on the rare books and manuscripts scene. The Maurice F. Neville Collection of Modern Literature, sold at auction through Sotheby's, New York, on April 13, included one Stevens item. A copy of *Harmonium*, in dust jacket and inscribed by Stevens ten days after the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, sold for \$10,200. An April catalog from Lame Duck Books (Boston) listed a first edition of Stevens' *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*, one of 80 numbered copies signed by the author, for \$5,000. In spring of 2004, another first edition of the same title, but without Stevens' signature, was listed by Bernard Shapero Rare Books for £850. In the autumn of 2003, David Schulson Autographs offered for \$675 a typed letter signed by Stevens to Wittenborn & Co., dated September 30, 1946, concerning his payment for an album of Paul Klee reproductions. Priscilla Juvelis, Inc., offered this summer for \$1,296 a fine press edition of *Study of Two Pears / Etude de deux poires*, a poem by Wallace Stevens with a translation into French by Bernard Noel and mezzotints by Judith Rothchild (Verdigris Press, 2003).

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Bill Ford noted on the Stevens List that a red dust jacket to the first printing of *Collected Poems* sold on eBay for \$410. The originally red dust jackets for the first printing of 2500 copies were subject to fading and so were changed to blue in later printings.

Sara S. Hodson
The Huntington Library

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Up and Running!

An Online Concordance to the Poetry of Wallace Stevens

www.wallacestevens.com

**The Wallace Stevens Society Program at MLA
December 27–30, 2004
Philadelphia**

Stevens in Contemporary Poetics

Session 115, Tuesday, December 28
10:15–11:30 a.m., 204-A, Convention Center

Program arranged by the Wallace Stevens Society

Presiding: Alan Filreis, Univ. of Pennsylvania

Speakers: Charles Bernstein, Univ. of Pennsylvania; Susan Howe, State Univ. of New York, Buffalo; Peter Gizzi, Univ. of Massachusetts, Amherst

**20th Century Literature and Culture Conference
February 24–26, 2005
University of Louisville**

Wallace Stevens and Rhetoric

1. " 'A crinkled paper makes a brilliant sound': Rhythm as Rhetoric in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens," Kate Ware, Univ. of Kentucky
2. "Myth, Gesture, and the Glaring Revelations of 'Blanche McCarthy,'" Kristine Santilli, Russell Sage Coll.
3. " 'It is posed and it is posed': The Rhetoric of Posing and Opposing Language in Wallace Stevens' Poetry," P. Michael Campbell, Coastal Carolina Univ.

For further information, contact
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