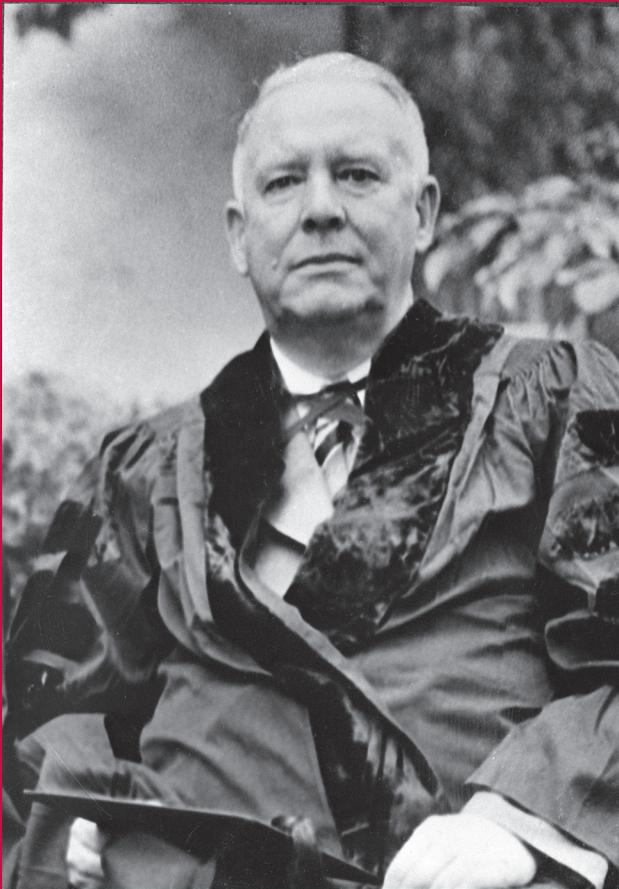


*The
Wallace
Stevens
Journal*



A Publication of The Wallace Stevens Society, Inc.

Volume 29

Number 2

Fall 2005

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Cover

Wallace Stevens

On the occasion of receiving an honorary doctorate
from Wesleyan University on June 15, 1947
(AP/Wide World Photos)

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

The subscription rate for individuals, both domestic and foreign, is \$30 for one year or \$50 for two years and includes membership in the Wallace Stevens Society. Rates for institutions are \$37 per year domestic and \$43 per year foreign. Back issues are available. Also available are volumes 1–25 on CD-ROM.

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

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

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



The Two Voices of Wallace Stevens' Blank Final Music

ANDREW GOLDSTONE

THE LATE POETRY of Wallace Stevens is disquieting. Gone are the spirit of playfulness and the riot of sensuous imagery that were an irrepressible part of his earlier work. In their place, Stevens' last poems evoke personal death and the end of the imagination, sometimes in language so abstract as to seem cold, even affectless. Stevens could be describing the world of his own later poems when he writes, in the last lines of "Burghers of Petty Death," of "an imperium of quiet, / In which a wasted figure, with an instrument, / Propounds blank final music" (CP 362). When the poems do depart from the icy conceptual realm, they do so fleetingly and disconcertingly. Stevens' late works do not address us with a smooth, continuous, personable voice. They move abruptly from image to idea and back, rendering the thoughts that we try to sense behind the poem difficult, elusive, even, sometimes, aloof. Mark Halliday, in his critique of the poet in *Stevens and the Interpersonal*, condemns this aloofness as a total withdrawal from compassion for others. Halliday sees an impoverished worldview in Stevens, a retreat into emotionally exhausted abstraction and a self-centered concern with poetry and the imagination as a way of escaping from interpersonal responsibilities. I hope to show, however, that it is also possible to set this withdrawing tendency within a larger framework by characterizing the late poetry of Stevens as a dialogue between two voices, one cosmic and cognitive, the other unforgivably perceptual and down-to-earth.

Stevens' late poems not only treat his great theme of the relationship between reality and the imagination; they also exhibit various versions of the dialogue form. The older Stevens' poetic language is jagged and difficult because it is composite; it is, in fact, two kinds of language in antiphony, what "The Man with the Blue Guitar" calls "a duet / With the undertaker: a voice in the clouds, / Another on earth" (CP 177). The duet takes many forms, and the oppositions between the voices are at once lexical, syntactic, and thematic. The voice in the clouds uses an abstract vocabulary and intricate hypotactic syntax to formulate metapoetic statements in favor of the value of the poetic imagination, whereas the perceptions by the voice on earth of a barren world symbolize a refusal to

acknowledge anything except the harsh reality of things. The thematic positions the voices stake out, however, are rarely as stable as the particularity of their language; the dialogic give-and-take, though irresolvable, is a genuine exchange of energies. If the late poems derive their power and their elusiveness from this two-voiced dynamic—this dual music—then to listen to only one of Stevens’ voices is to misread him. Stevens is not only the poet of thought depicted by Frank Doggett in *Stevens’ Poetry of Thought*, nor the perpetually remote figure of Halliday’s reading. The older Stevens is a complex entity, and we can, I think, come to a more nuanced understanding of his later poetry if we take full account of his multivocality.¹

One of Stevens’ most clearly two-voiced late poems is “The Plain Sense of Things,” in which statements of metapoetic analysis and perceptions of a bare reality take turns. A propositional, reflective language is in dialogue with a descriptive language of stark facts. These two components, set in counterpoint, are the melodies of Stevens’ two poetic voices. The plain-sense voice observes concrete things; the analytic voice comments on the poem’s progress, offering explanations and qualifications. I show here the antiphonal relation of these two voices:

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

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

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

Analytic: Yet the absence of the imagination had
 Itself to be imagined.

Plain sense: The great pond,

Analytic: The plain sense of it,

Plain sense: without reflections, leaves,
 Mud, water like dirty glass, expressing silence

Of a sort, silence of a rat come out to see,
 The great pond and its waste of the lilies,

to *imagine* it as such? Epistemological disorientation undermines the abstract affirmation of the poetic faculty, leaving no reason for accepting the principle that the imagination is compelled to summon up its own death.

If the pronouncements of the metapoetic voice held sway over the entire poem, this model of an arbitrarily self-destructive poetic faculty would have the last word in "The Plain Sense of Things," but in fact the abstract self-analysis of the poem, which led us to this gloomy extreme, does not define the multivocal whole. The moderating element, surprisingly, originates in the lines of the plain-sense voice in the final two stanzas. The voice of things themselves does not disappear with the savage image of repetitive "men and flies," a phrase that suggests, against the philosophical pretensions of the metapoetic voice, that the language of the poem is merely aimless, insect-like buzzing, with no ennobling qualities and no hope of restoring the wrecked edifice of the imagination. In the poem's second section, the scene changes from the collapsed mansion to its natural equivalent, a pond full of decaying organic matter. The figure of the "rat come out to see" in the opening of the last stanza qualifies the "silence" that ended the penultimate stanza without a period, showing it to be, after the reflective pause of the stanza break, only silence "Of a sort." As the winter comes, the surface of the great pond seems to turn blank, to lose "reflections" because of the obscuring effect of "leaves, / Mud, water like dirty glass." Yet the rat comes out to look at the cold, blank expanse, relieving the feeling of total emptiness; the intrusion of the rat into the otherwise inanimate scene allows the poet, in the last stanza, to notice the "waste of the lilies" of the great pond. The rat, a living being who is able to see, recalls the poet's own continuing existence; the rat's capacity to see constitutes an admission by the poet of his own subjectivity, restoring to the blank world of things at least one active, present imagination. The unsentimental sympathy for the individual that Stevens exhibits in the portrayal of the rat moderates the immensity of the death of the "great structure."

The poet's self-perception as a "rat come out to see," a scavenger surviving on winter's last scraps of food, partially redeems the poem from the dark riddles of the metapoetic voice. Instead of a complete shutdown of the imaginative faculties, a dead silence, the poet sees himself as an active imagination within the end of the imagination, just as the rat is silent but still alive, still searching in a landscape that is not totally barren, if only because of the "waste of the lilies." But Stevens' use of the rat is hardly a sentimental gesture of consolation. The metapoetic voice may claim, in the first stanza, that we are "Inanimate in an inert savoir," but the end of the poem eradicates the hope for the anesthesia offered by total obliteration. The two voices of the poem cross in a thematic chiasmus: the metapoetic voice, which began with an affirmation of the necessity of the imagination against the destruction initially depicted by the voice of bare reality, comes in the end to demolish that affirmation with its ungrounded

principles of self-destruction; at the same time, it is the plain sense of things that offers some hope of restoring the imagination.

"The Plain Sense of Things" is not only another treatment of the theme of reality and the imagination; it is a fraught internal dialogue about how the poet is to cope with the reality of a failing imagination, even a failing life. No single language is adequate to this task, but the combination of the metapoetic and plain-sense voices does suffice to create a littler poetry within the end of the greater poetry, as the "[voice] on earth" continues its sad dialogue with the "voice in the clouds."²

The idea of a literature consisting of multiple languages in dialogue, each of which represents a particular worldview that coincides only partly with an author's intentions and meanings, is familiar from M. M. Bakhtin's work on the stylistics of the novel, particularly his essay "Discourse in the Novel." Bakhtin could be describing the multivocality of "The Plain Sense of Things" when he writes:

[A]ll languages of heteroglossia, whatever the principle underlying them and making each unique, are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values. As such they all may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically. . . . They may all be drawn in by the novelist for the orchestration of his themes and for the refracted (indirect) expression of his intentions and values. (291–92)

The descriptive, plain-sense language and the quasi-philosophical, conceptual language of "The Plain Sense of Things" (and, as I hope to show, of other Stevens poems) represent just such dialogically interrelated perspectives on the world of the poet and his imagination. Neither one corresponds exactly to the complex meaning of the poem, but both are "orchestrated" by the poet into the music of the duet with the undertaker.

It is, of course, inappropriate to apply Bakhtin's ideas about the dialogic nature of novelistic prose to poetry; for Bakhtin, poetry represents the antithesis of the dialogicality of the novel. In "Discourse in the Novel," poetry constitutes the monological foil to the dialogical novel, the ground upon which Bakhtin figures his image of artistic prose; as a genre, according to Bakhtin, the lyric depends on an Edenic vision of a single language, fully present to the meanings and intentions of its speaker:

The poet is a poet insofar as he accepts the idea of a unitary and singular language and a unitary, monologically sealed-off utterance. These ideas are immanent in the poetic genres with which he works. . . . Each word must express the poet's *mean-*

ing directly and without mediation; there must be no distance between the poet and his word. (296–97)

This model does not fit the poetics of works such as “The Plain Sense of Things” very well.³ Neither the poem’s matter-of-fact, descriptive language nor its cognitive, metapoetic discourse conveys Stevens’ meaning “directly and without mediation”; instead, they represent contradictory points of view on the world and the imagination, neither of which can capture the full intricacy of Stevens’ meaning, since the thinking mind represented by Stevens’ poem will not settle into a single point of view.

Stevens’ poetic duet resembles Bakhtin’s “double-voiced prose word” (327) much more closely than it resembles his description of the poetic symbol. According to Bakhtin, “[t]he polysemy of the poetic symbol presupposes the unity of a voice with which it is identical, and it presupposes that such a voice is completely alone within its own discourse” (328). Bakhtin gives an example of this distinction between poetic symbolism and the double-voiced quality of prose that is directly apposite to our approach to Stevens’ plain-sense voice:

To understand the difference between ambiguity in poetry and double-voicedness in prose, it is sufficient to take any symbol and give it an ironic accent . . . , that is, to introduce into it one’s own voice, to refract within it one’s own fresh intention. (328)

Symbols such as the diminished “great structure” or the fallen leaves are to be taken ironically, in Bakhtin’s sense: to understand the poem in its entirety, each image—like each analytical statement—must be understood not as flowing directly from *the* unitary meaning, but as representing a meaning that the poet orchestrates into the contrapuntal dialogue of meanings that make up the poem as a whole.

The landscape of “Burghers of Petty Death” is as bleak as that of “The Plain Sense of Things,” and the grim sense of living in a diminished world seems even stronger, but it, too, may be understood dialogically, in terms of the duet with the undertaker. In this small poem from *Transport to Summer*, Stevens elegizes a couple, possibly his long-dead parents.⁴ The poet begins with dispassionate observation:

These two by the stone wall
Are a slight part of death.
The grass is still green. (CP 362)

The next stanza evokes an all-encompassing doom:

But there is a total death,
A devastation, a death of great height

And depth, covering all surfaces,
Filling the mind. (CP 362)

The poem's remaining two stanzas repeat this alternation between two perspectives, moving from the language of human-scale, particular smallness to that of grandiose and unspecified magnitude:

These are the small townsmen of death,
A man and a woman, like two leaves
That keep clinging to a tree,
Before winter freezes and grows black—

Of great height and depth
Without any feeling, an imperium of quiet,
In which a wasted figure, with an instrument,
Propounds blank final music. (CP 362)

This dialogue between two points of view belongs to the same category of forms as the dialogue of the metapoetic and plain-sense voices of "The Plain Sense of Things." In "Burghers of Petty Death," however, the voice in the clouds seems to prevail in the poet's consideration of death: not only does the "death of great height / And depth" appear to win out with the final stanza, but even the two stanzas devoted to the couple are truncated. (The first stanza is a line shorter than the other three, and the third stanza stops in mid-sentence, whereas the other two stanzas are end-stopped.) Even within the first and third stanzas, Stevens has little to say about the two people; they are only "These two," "A man and a woman," "small townsmen." The poet seems to have muted the voice on earth.

For Halliday, this apparent domination of the poem by the voice of magnitude is enough to convict the poem of a fatalistic and selfish indifference to the suffering of others, a willful escape, in fact, from the voice of the undertaker. "Burghers of Petty Death" is Halliday's specimen example in *Stevens and the Interpersonal* of a strategy of "Dwarfing or miniaturizing of others by viewing them as if from a great distance and in a context much larger than individual life" (22). Through this artifice, Halliday says, "[T]he poem is relieved of any need to characterize the man and woman or to specify their mortal hurts" (22). According to Halliday, this poem, by "mov[ing] statement toward abstraction, away from the particulars of perception" (23), avoids any real confrontation with the suffering of the couple. To illustrate the way in which the dwarfing operates in "Burghers of Petty Death," Halliday writes of the simile of the "two leaves / That keep clinging to a tree":

The poem confronts an entire universe of mortality; death is seen to fill the world as it fills the mind that contemplates it,

and within this bleak panorama the particular man and woman
have been reduced to specks, two lingering leaves on a tree. . . .
(22)

For this critic, the tune of the voice of ether strikes a false note.⁵

Halliday, in belittling the figure of the leaves as a mere strategy for “dwarfing” the couple, seems unwilling to assent to the pathos of “clinging,” to the poet’s sympathy for the frailness of the individual attachment to life. The poet acknowledges the inexorable progress of large natural cycles, but he declines to be fatalistic, refusing to become complacent in the idea of those cycles as impersonal processes. In narrowing his scope down to the scale of two leaves that remain on the tree after the general leaf-fall has happened, Stevens alerts us to the raggedness of seasonal change when seen in sharp focus; the world’s leaves no more consent to falling down all together than do the world’s people go gently to their deaths. This realization is a more piercing and emotional version of the appearance of the rat in “The Plain Sense of Things,” a sudden focusing of the poet’s eye on the smallest natural scale. The juxtaposition of the change of the season to winter and the deaths of the couple is not, as Halliday claims it is, part of a technique for shielding the poet from compassion through fatalism, but rather a way of sharpening his sense of the couple’s attachment to life despite the overwhelming fact of death.

The admission of this overwhelming fact is not in itself fatalism; it is motivated only by the honesty of the nonbeliever. Honesty also compels Stevens, in this poem, to remain true to his own reactions to the absolute-ness of death, to incorporate the language of magnitude as well as the language of particular detail, despite their inevitable conflict. The poet is searching for a poetry adequate to one of grief’s most terrifying aspects, the sense that all the particularity of the dead person has been obliterated. At the funeral Stevens conducts for the man and the woman of “Burghers of Petty Death,” he forgoes the desperate retelling of those anecdotes with which we try in vain to preserve the most characteristic facets of a lost life, even to the extent of deciding against the specification Halliday demands of their “mortal hurts.” “Burghers of Petty Death” has little of this conventional kind of characterization, not because Stevens wishes to avoid emotional investment but because he declines to sentimentalize. The danger is not, as Halliday would have it, of “dwarfing” the two figures but of inflating them falsely in a futile attempt to make their death into the cataclysm the speaker feels it is. Indeed, the poem enacts the speaker’s inner conflict over the proper scale on which to see this experience, the seesawing between the human, ground-level perspective and the awful feeling of the overwhelming magnitude of death in the abstract, a wrenching version of the dialogue of the voice of the undertaker and the voice in the clouds.

Halliday sees only the macroscopic scale in this poem, not the microscopic one, but "Burghers of Petty Death" tries to see both, even as it records the terrible pull of the gigantic. In the second stanza, where the "total death" first intrudes, it pulls the speaker into exaggeration: not only is death "of great height / And depth," but also, he claims, it covers "all surfaces." This assertion runs up against the clear-eyed perception from the first stanza that "The grass is still green," and generates a shortened line of admission: the grandiose "devastation" does not yet occupy all of the world, but is instead "Filling the mind." The word "mind" is a hinge-point, standing precisely in the middle of the poem, qualifying the bare declarations that have preceded it—"These two . . . / Are," "The grass is still," "there is a total death"—by admitting the speaker's subjectivity. It suggests that each statement might bear the implicit tag "in my mind." This revelation then generates the return of the speaker's attention to the couple in the third stanza. Halliday says that the poem "must stand away at a distance from which the lovers are only 'the small townsmen of death' " (21-22), but there is intimacy in the repetition of the proximal deictic of the opening line: "These are the small townsmen of death," just as "these two" were buried by the stone wall. The grammatical construction for emotional neutrality would have been the definite article or a neutral pronoun, "the two by the stone wall," "they are the small townsmen of death," but Stevens draws in closer, fixing his gaze on the figures even as death seems to take over, as "winter freezes and grows black" and the voice of ether sings its most terrifying abstract theme.

Nearness informs the final stanza, in which Stevens returns to the second stanza's language of immensity while elaborating its acknowledgment of subjectivity. The omission, in the fourth stanza, of the key word "death"—present in each of the first three stanzas—suggests that the total death no longer fills the poet's mind. The expansive middle lines of the stanza and the syntactic variation of the relative clause of "In which" allow the form to relax after the taut, simple sentences of the first half of the poem. The last line of the poem finishes on a sigh, with the feminine ending of "music." In a move identical to the introduction, in "The Plain Sense of Things," of the "rat come out to see," the last stanza of "Burghers of Petty Death" restores to the death "Of great height and depth" the figure who conjures it up, portraying not a featureless universal devastation but a near-universal quiet in which a single instrument is yet heard, in which the poet reveals his place in creating this music of blank hugeness—and exhibits his partially ironizing distance from that language of immensity.

"Burghers of Petty Death" itself seems terribly diminished, a tiny poem in its physical presence on the page among the expansive statements of *Transport to Summer*, a plain thing of four stanzas among the elaborate confections of large, multi-sectional sequences. It is nonetheless as arresting as the figure that the word "propounds" calls up, the man in the old coat of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," who motivates the poet "not to

console / Nor sanctify, but plainly to propound" (*CP* 389).⁶ That clown-like, shabby major man, "beyond the town, / Looking for what was, where it used to be" (*CP* 389), resembles the wasted figure of the speaker looking at the burial place of the dead couple, unable to summon up anything other than the bare reality of their deaths, with no way to sanctify the dead and no way to console himself. Even so, he continues to put forth, to propound. Propounding may be the least expressive manner of musical production, and "blank" and "final" the very coldest kinds of music, yet still someone sounds music of a sort. For Doggett, that music is non-music, "the blank final silence of non-being after total destruction—the music of nothingness" (190). But viewed as the outcome of a dialogue of perspectives, the "blank final music" of "Burghers of Petty Death" is not total silence; the music of total devastation is only the melody of one of the poem's two voices. To hear both voices is to perceive the return of the diminished individual to a world in which the destruction was only apparently absolute.

In "Somnambulisma," also from *Transport to Summer*, Stevens once again resorts to a double voice. An onomatopoeic voice describes the ocean and the figure of the bird that the ocean makes in the sand; a voice of knotty hypothetical reasoning conjures a "geography of the dead" and a remote "scholar." The poem has the simplest possible dialogic structure: one voice presents one figure and then the other voice presents the other. Stevens begins with the voice on earth, in the natural world—in a world, we might say, of the plain sense of things:

On an old shore, the vulgar ocean rolls
 Noiselessly, noiselessly, resembling a thin bird,
 That thinks of settling, yet never settles, on a nest.

The wings keep spreading and yet are never wings.
 The claws keep scratching on the shale, the shallow
 shale,
 The sounding shallow, until by water washed away.

The generations of the bird are all
 By water washed away. They follow after.
 They follow, follow, follow, in water washed away.

(*CP* 304)

"Somnambulisma," as Helen Vendler has pointed out, rewrites "The Idea of Order at Key West," reprising the vision of the musical figure on the shore as a symbol for the poet making art out of nature (69). Unlike the "maker" of the earlier poem, however, the bird, formed directly from the patterns of the natural world, is an artist of pure imitation. The bird's songs follow the movements of the ocean by their nature, just as the first three

stanzas of the poem resonate with verbal and sonic echoes in imitation of the repeated sounds of the waves and of birdsong. Yet this ocean bird who breathes with the rhythm of the ocean is not adequate as a complete image for the poet; its sonically mimetic, onomatopoeic language embodies only a single poetic approach to nature.

In the last two quatrains, another language and another articulating persona emerge:

Without this bird that never settles, without
Its generations that follow in their universe,
The ocean, falling and falling on the hollow shore,

Would be a geography of the dead: not of that land
To which they may have gone, but of the place in which
They lived, in which they lacked a pervasive being,

In which no scholar, separately dwelling,
Poured forth the fine fins, the gawky beaks, the
personalia,
Which, as a man feeling everything, were his. (*CP* 304)

The scholar-figure of the final stanza contrasts with the bird-figure: he works at a distance, “separately dwelling,” more in the manner of the analytic voice of “The Plain Sense of Things.” He thinks and feels everything at once, and then creates his *copia*, in an elaborate cognitive process enacted by the nested syntax of the single sentence making up the last three stanzas of the poem. The two figures could be the personifications of the voice on earth and the voice in the clouds of “The Man with the Blue Guitar.” The language used for the bird is a plain-sense-like, observational, mimetic language, whereas the hypotactic language used for the scholar has the form of philosophical, analytical speculation. The use of two personae, both in their own ways insubstantial—the bird really consisting only of lines in the sand, the scholar imagined as dwelling only outside the real—gives rise to a conception of the making artist as fragmented, a tenuous personality with far less power and authority than the woman singing by the sea in “The Idea of Order at Key West,” whose single melody contrasts with the two-voiced exchange of “Somnambulisma.”

In *Words Chosen Out of Desire*, Helen Vendler criticizes this use of two personae for the artist as a technical shortcoming: “In this respect,” she writes, “the poem fails, I think, to cohere, since it needs two figures, the bird and the scholar, as a composite to represent the poet” (70). This double personification, together with the two languages needed to articulate it, places “Somnambulisma” in the same category as “The Plain Sense of Things,” with its concrete and abstract voices, and “Burghers of Petty

Death," with its voices of immensity and specificity. The incoherence, the refusal to resolve the two principles, is, it can be argued, both honest and necessary to the poem's dialogic picture of poetic consciousness. The bird and the scholar, neither of which is ever embraced as a full alter ego for the poet, stand for two possible kinds of poetry. The poem does not choose one or the other; it makes use of both in its two languages, the echoing, imitative language of "follow, follow, follow," and the elaborately cognitive language of "but of the place in which / They lived, in which they lacked a pervasive being." Just as we had to resist the seductions of the metapoetic voice as it concluded "The Plain Sense of Things," here too we should not assume that the scholar is the poem's complete, final figure for the artist, encompassing all of the qualities of the bird and replacing it, merely because the poem ends with the scholar.

The bird fills four of the poem's six stanzas, and yet it is not enough for Stevens. In the first three stanzas, the bird occupies an uncertain, dream-like middle ground between figuration and reality. At first the ocean is said only to be "resembling a thin bird," but then the parts of the bird leap out of the subordinate clause, becoming the subjects of their own sentences in the second stanza: "the wings keep spreading," "The claws keep scratching." Immediately the poet reverses course, denying the physical reality of his metaphor: the wings "yet are never wings," the claws are "by water washed away." The first line of the third stanza seeks further to stabilize the bird's reality by multiplying it, giving it "generations," and yet the line ends without a period, washing out the declaration as we realize that the generations, too, are only a figure, which, as the refrain reminds us, are erased by the actual, "vulgar" ocean. When the poet opens the second half of the poem with the hypothesis of the consequences to the world if the bird did not exist, he is in the realm of the actual, just as, in "Burghers of Petty Death," the total death, however qualified, is quite real; in the strict sense, the bird does not exist. The fact that the ocean washes away the generations of the bird makes the danger that the ocean "would be" a geography of the dead imminent, threatening to leap out of the conditional and into the indicative. In the fifth stanza, the negations and subordinate clauses pile up in dizzying fashion, until the most negative, barren possibility—the geography of the dead defined by the leftover landscape of empty lives, with no redeeming natural-poetic voice to enliven the scene—threatens to take over.

In answer to this threat, which the imagined bird, born out of the poet's delight in the ocean's sounds and movements, could not nullify, the poet conjures a different figure, one more appropriate for this moment of intense negative feeling, of terror of death's obliterating power: the scholar who dwells apart from nature. Since, unlike the bird, he cannot be washed away, he seems to be able to "Pour[] forth" creations without being governed by the force of death inherent in all creations of the ocean itself. Yet, as Vendler remarks, the scholar's final music does not have the grandeur

of the ocean bird's spreading wings and endless generations; it bodies forth only the trimmings of being, fins, beaks, and personalia (instead of, say, noble breasts, shining eyes, and regalia). The scholar's torrent of hypotheses and qualifications in the final two stanzas feels weak and distant from the grandeur of the ocean. The scholar, like the bird, is a poetic fiction, an imaginative construct whose language is useful for some of the poem's purposes but not all.

"Somnambulisma" shares in the complex of attitudes that produces the "blank final music" of "Burghers of Petty Death." In the face of a "vulgar," indifferent, natural enormity, which dwarfs the deaths of people and seems able to empty their lives of meaning and sympathy, the poet attempts to find a place for his art, but he does not hide the fact that the artist and his work must be diminished, a mere remnant of the master-artist and her song in "The Idea of Order at Key West." Stevens entertains two extreme versions of himself, but he settles on neither; his back-and-forth movement is like the ocean bird's, driven by his constant acknowledgment that neither figure, neither language, provides any but a very meager answer to the impossible question of how to make adequate art that does not ignore the magnitude of death.

Like "Somnambulisma," "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" is a six-tercet poem that winds through many hesitations before ending on an ambiguous note of celebration. Yet this poem, too, is a duet, the product of conflicting impulses; we hear the voice in the clouds singing a hymn affirming the power of the poetic imagination, but we can never ignore the quiet notes of the voice on earth reminding us of the poverty of the reality out of which the celestial voice seeks to elevate us. A call-and-response between the two voices, however, is difficult to mark out neatly; the dialogue in "Final Soliloquy" arises out of Stevens' moves toward a qualifying, critical distance from the grand claims of the voice in the clouds. Taking a cue from Bakhtin's readings of Dickens and Turgenev, we might imagine that those grand claims are surrounded by partially ironizing, dialogizing quotation marks:

Light the first light of evening, as in a room
In which we rest and, for small reason, think
"The world imagined is the ultimate good."

This is, therefore, "the intensest rendezvous."
It is in that thought that "we collect ourselves,
Out of all the indifferences, into one thing:

Within a single thing," a single shawl
Wrapped tightly round us, since we are poor, a warmth,
A light, "a power, the miraculous influence."

"Here, now, we forget each other and ourselves."
We feel "the obscurity of an order, a whole,
A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous,"

Within its vital boundary, in the mind.
We say "God and the imagination are one . . .
How high that highest candle lights the dark."

Out of this same light, "out of the central mind,"
We make a dwelling in the evening air,
"In which being there together is enough."

(CP 524; quotation marks added)

The resounding tones of the poem's final lines need not govern our reading of the whole of this poem any more than the final lines did in "The Plain Sense of Things" or "Somnambulisma."

I have committed the violence of placing the poem's vast, generalized—even vague—affirmations in quotation marks in order to point up the contrast with a more skeptical language formed from a combination of concrete physical detail ("Light the first light of evening") and qualifying phrases ("for small reason, think," "We say"). Since the poem makes its most powerful declarations—"The world imagined is the ultimate good," "God and the imagination are one"—only via indirect discourse, all of the claims of the voice in the clouds take on a faintly ironic cast, as if phrases such as "the miraculous influence" were themselves only something we utter "for small reason," "since we are poor." This is not to say that the speaker of the poem distances himself entirely from those claims; but the continual reminders of a less glorious physical reality (the first light of evening, the shawl wrapped round us, the room in which we rest) give the poem's language of communion the ring of the counterfactual, of the sometimes hoped-for rather than the joyously celebrated; the voice in the clouds is not the only voice in this "Soliloquy."

In the optimist's reading toward which the voice in the clouds calls us in the final lines, this poem is a grand affirmation of the imagination, in which the poet's mind is capable of creating a dwelling in which to encounter a universal consciousness. Thus, Doggett writes that "Final Soliloquy" is the poet's "most explicit statement" of "Stevens' apotheosis of the continuing human consciousness," in which the "imagination, by its formulation of reality out of possibility, creates for each man the existent in thought and feeling, even the place as it is where he finds himself" (138–39). In this reading, the poem is a "soliloquy" because the speaker has achieved a total unity with his paramour, and they speak with one voice.⁷

But we must hear the other voice in the dialogue, and we must confront the conflict between the first-person-plural rendezvous of the con-

tent and the “soliloquy” announced by the title. In the most cynical reading—the one most distanced from the phrases I have enclosed in quotation marks—if the poet and the interior paramour are one, it is because there was always only one of them; the poet tries to make a passionate rendezvous out of a moment of solitude and self-communion, but the rendezvous happens, quite literally, only in his imagination. Doggett recognizes some of this “skepticism,” but he maintains that the poem as a whole points to an “intuition of the noumenal world” (140). Stevens’ own doubts make the poem into a dialogue. The degree to which Stevens calls into question his own intuitions, however, suggests that “Final Soliloquy” is not the “explicit statement” that Doggett labels it; it is, as we expect in Stevens, a complex whole in which the voice of heavenly affirmation can never completely silence the doubting voice of earthly poverty.

It is, therefore, difficult to describe the tone of “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour.” Just as the third stanza’s “single shawl / Wrapped tightly round us” is at once a solacing comfort and a meager reminder of our poverty—an effect redoubled by the wrapping of “since we are poor” within the verbal shawl made by “a single thing” and “a warmth”—each moment of elation seems only to point toward the barrenness typical of experience, and each sad concession of loneliness is capable of enlarging itself into a perception of a divine unity. The deictic moments in the first lines of the second and fourth stanzas, the lone instants of certainty, in which a declarative statement is exactly a line long, quickly give way to the admission of subjectivity, which restores the momentarily forgotten quotation marks: the declaration of the intensest rendezvous was only “[a] thought” in which “we collect ourselves,” and the “Here, now” of self-forgetting was at best a feeling of obscurity. As in “Burghers of Petty Death,” the temptation to give way before magnitude—not, now, the empty magnitude of death but one potentially filled out by divinity—is not allowed to dominate the whole poem. The poet’s strictly maintained awareness of his own subjectivity, his knowledge that what he feels arises out of the workings of his own imagination, moderates what might have become, in a different poet, a poem of mystical ecstasy, by engaging and challenging those ecstatic tendencies in a dialogue. Although the edifice of the poet’s imagination does not fall apart entirely, it is greatly reduced. Something closer to a minor house than to a great structure is left standing in the evening air.

Stevens offers one possible summary of his final poetic project, which remains acutely conscious of the limitations of mortal being, in the dramatic dialogue that stands at the end of *The Auroras of Autumn*, “Angel Surrounded by Paysans.” The poet’s alter ego is an angel apparent only as a discarnate voice, which declares itself as the “necessary angel of earth,” human and yet capable of transfiguring the world, before vanishing. Although he speaks to a number of countrymen, the annunciating angel is

already gone from the door at which they stand, and the physical situation of the exchange remains hazy:

One of the countrymen:

There is
A welcome at the door to which no one comes?

The angel:

I am the angel of reality,
Seen for a moment standing in the door. (CP 496)

In the transience of its protagonist—the poem ends with the word “gone”—as well as in the light elusiveness of its often enjambed couplets, “Angel Surrounded by Paysans” sounds another version of the late poems’ two-voiced music of blankness and finality.

For this duet the terminology of “The Man with the Blue Guitar” XXIII applies at the literal level: the angel’s celestial voice is precisely the “voice in the clouds,” and the doubting, questioning countrymen are truly a voice “on earth.” But the angel’s speech is also itself duet-like in form, for it sets affirmations of the angel’s heavenly, revelatory powers against reminders of the angel’s vanishing:

I have neither ashen wing nor wear of ore
And live without a tepid aureole,

Or stars that follow me, not to attend,
But, of my being and its knowing, part.

I am one of you and being one of you
Is being and knowing what I am and know.

Yet I am the necessary angel of earth,
Since, in my sight, you see the earth again,

Cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set,
And, in my hearing, you hear its tragic drone

Rise liquidly in liquid lingerings,
Like watery words awash; like meanings said

By repetitions of half-meanings. (CP 496–97)

Syntactically, the distinction between these opposite tendencies is made by means of grammatical person: the angel’s first-person statements emphasize his transience, his earthliness, his non-transcendence (“I have neither ashen wing nor wear of ore”), whereas his utterances in the second

person proclaim the possibility of transfiguring bare reality with poetic vision (“you see the earth again”). The pairings of the angel’s first person with a plain-sense outlook and his second person—that is, the countrymen—with the hope of imaginative transformation create a chiasmus like the one at the end of “The Plain Sense of Things,” in which it was not the metapoetic but the plain-sense voice that revealed the partially renovating image of the “rat come out to see.” The angel is not merely a symbol for the transforming power of the imagination, because his language knots together the two melody lines of the duet with the undertaker, the antiphony of the cosmic and the down-to-earth modes.

This dialogue within the angel’s monologue is a figure for the impossibility of reconciling the demands of the two voices. Indeed, “Angel Surrounded by Paysans” never settles on a single thematic position: the lines that recall the plain reality of death, the “tragic drone” of the earth, counterbalance the parts of the poem that seem to promise an epiphany. This balance is especially poignant in the poem’s conclusion:

Am I not,
 Myself, only half of a figure of a sort,

 A figure half seen, or seen for a moment, a man
 Of the mind, an apparition apparelled in

 Apparels of such lightest look that a turn
 Of my shoulder and quickly, too quickly, I am gone?
 (CP 497)

If there is an angel, he is seen only “for a moment standing in the door,” already about to leave; if the angel can raise the “tragic drone” of the earth into “liquid lingerings” free of the rigidity of the everyday “man-locked set” of the world, the threefold emphasis on his ghostliness as “an apparition apparelled in / Apparels” attenuates his revelatory power. When the angel speaks as an “angel of reality,” an “angel of earth,” simultaneously terrestrial and celestial, plain-sense and metapoetic, he seems to be uniting the two voices, just as the angel’s half-present, half-absent status keeps the poem suspended between epiphanic manifestation and mortal disappearance. This synthetic personage, however, only gives form to the conflict of opposites represented by angel and countrymen, or by the angel’s own two voices, his “I” and his “you”; he does not resolve it. The angel’s nature is itself expressed by internal dialogue. The standing of the angel represents Stevens’ own position in the midst of that conflict, as a single person feeling the need to compose poetic duets, urgently straining in the last years of his existence for a unified voice, without ever attaining it. The earthly sympathies of Stevens’ angel sometimes clash with his cosmic vision.

Faced with the necessity of both of his two voices despite their continuing dissonance, the poet looks for a way to make meaning outside the realm of the simple statement. Just at the moment that the angel proclaims that “in [his] hearing” the drone of the earth will rise for the countrymen, the speaker falls into tautology, seeming to experience a disintegration of verbal coherence. In the space of four couplets there are three egregiously redundant phrases: “Rise liquidly in liquid lingerings,” “watery words awash,” and “apparition apparelled in / Apparels”; at the same time the necessary angel tells us that his sound is “like meanings said / By repetitions of half-meanings.” The tautologies suggest, therefore, that meanings are inherently double, that the poet is only ever articulating one half-meaning at a time—that, in short, he must speak in two voices if he is to get at whole truths. The tautology is the rhetorical figure *par excellence* of the “half of a figure of a sort”: the repeated words are “figure[s] half seen,” markers for the missing other member of the pair that could complete the meaning of the phrase, if only it were possible to articulate the entire truth at once. The tautologies imply the other halves of their own meanings without being able to offer them explicitly; the underlying meaning of these lines cannot be given directly, can only be mentioned (or quoted in dialogue), can only be represented in outline; the meanings may be “said” but not *meant*. If in this instant of the angel’s hearing he allows us (or “you,” the countrymen) to experience the tragic drone in liquid lingerings, on another occasion the other “half of a figure of a sort” will let us hear a very different meaning. The voices of heaven and of earth sing melodies of different kinds. For the angel to sing both at once is impossible; no poetry rich enough to achieve a total consolidation exists.

What remains, in place of that unattainable perfect unity, is the final music of the duet with the undertaker, propounded by a soon-to-evanesce intermediary figure. Stevens, in his late poems, continues to search for the comforts of the poetic imagination, but he does not waver in his commitment to a true depiction of the workings of death; he is always sensitive to the plain fact of mortality. That fact generates Stevens’ dialogic poetry, with its often disconcerting moves from descriptive to propositional language, from the observational to the analytic, from the particular to the general. The dialogue of these different kinds of language constitutes an intricate, two-voiced representation of a consciousness trying out several perspectives in its attempts to give an adequate account of its world. The carnival of the early Stevens is no more; instead, Stevens’ comic sophistication has become an ironic ability to watch his own reactions, to regard them skeptically from without as well as affirmatively from within. Under these circumstances, one can hardly believe poetry survives at all, but for Stevens it does. The late poetry justifies the work of the poet not by a triumphant declaration of the power of art and the imagination but by a total fidelity to Stevens’ experience, which orchestrates together the admonitions of plain things and the illuminations of the imagination. In

Stevens' blank final music, we can perhaps no longer hope, as "The Man with the Blue Guitar" had done, for "thought / And the truth, Dichtung und Wahrheit, all / Confusion solved" (CP 177); even if that hope is gone, however, the perplexed duets of the last poems, which take us from the clouds to the earth and back again, still testify to the late conditions of existence and thought.

Yale University

Notes

¹Doggett also recognizes a dialogue-like structure in Stevens: "The thought in a poem of Stevens is composed of an interchange of statement and symbolic imagery" (169). For this critic, however, the image "fills out" the statement (169). The nature of this interchange, as I hope to show, is not always one of harmonious complementarity; the abstract statement is often at odds with the thought and feeling implied by the image. The interchange becomes a true dialogue carried out on both—or between—the personal and expressive planes.

²Bart Eeckhout, in *Wallace Stevens and the Limits of Reading and Writing*, gives a reading of "The Plain Sense of Things" that is sensitive to the poem's ambiguities, its successive turns away from and toward the imagination. He still concludes, however, that the poem is a "reaffirmation of the imagination" arising out of an "attempt at reaching the plain sense of things . . . at once perceptual . . . affective . . . and cognitive" (200). But the "perceptual" and the "cognitive" routes toward "plain sense" do not end up at the same place; the dialogue of "The Plain Sense of Things" does not end with a collective agreement. Eeckhout places too much faith in the final two lines as a definitive summary of the whole of the poem.

³Bakhtin's view of poetry as monological is not, of course, meant to be so narrow or so absolute. In "Discourse in the Novel," he presents his thesis about the unitary language of poetry mostly as a way of making a useful contrast to his real concern, novelistic discourse. "It goes without saying," he writes in an understated footnote, "that we continually advance as typical the extreme to which poetic genres aspire; in concrete examples of poetic works it is possible to find features fundamental to prose, and numerous hybrids of various generic types exist" (Bakhtin 287 n).

⁴According to Thomas Lombardi, the "two by the stone wall" in "Burghers of Petty Death" are John and Catherine Zeller, Stevens' great-grandparents (51). In light of evidence from Stevens' letters, Lombardi concludes that the poem is set in the Amityville, Pennsylvania, cemetery where the Zellers are buried, which Stevens visited in the course of his genealogical researches. Whichever figures from Stevens' biography we choose to connect to the couple in the poem, the power of the work remains in the tensions between the poet's passionate reactions to their deaths in particular and death in general.

⁵Halliday criticizes Stevens for deliberately turning away from society. In "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin sees a tendency to turn away from social complexity in all poetry. Poetry's need to assert a unitary language opposes the socially rooted dialogism of the novel. For Bakhtin, the heteroglossia to be discovered in novels is based in social stratification and social diversity, in "[c]oncrete socio-ideological language consciousness" (295). Although Stevens, too, might be said to exhibit "heteroglossia," his language really corresponds to different perspectives that the poet might himself choose to adopt or might imagine others adopting. I set aside the consideration of the social situations of those potential selves.

⁶Although in the collected works "Burghers of Petty Death" precedes "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," "Notes" was published separately in 1942, four years before Stevens published "Burghers of Petty Death" in *Quarterly Review of Literature*, so it is quite likely Stevens is alluding to the long poem here.

⁷Doggett is not the only critic who has read the poem affirmatively. Milton Bates, for example, enthusiastically argues for the poem's warm sense of communion; the poem passes from "exhilaration" to a "feeling of quiet satisfaction" (301–02). Harold Bloom, although he questions the power of the "highest candle," also believes "Stevens is not being ironic" (359). Jacqueline Vaught Brogan is much more aware of all of the poem's ambiguities and qualifications; for her, however, they center upon the mythic "possibility of *metaphor*" (36). In a recent article, B. J. Leggett has dissented from the interpretation of the poem's voice-in-the-clouds affirmations as an apotheosis of the poet, offering an alternative reading of the identification of God as the imagination. Leggett still strives, however, even while taking account of ambiguities in the poem's language, to make the poem a single-voiced utterance of the poet. According to Leggett, "the poet says flatly and conclusively what before has been evasive—God and the imagination are one, the ultimate statement of the final fiction" (176).

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“These Minutiae Mean More”: Five Editions of Wallace Stevens’ “Esthétique du Mal”

JEFF JAECKLE

I

“ESTHÉTIQUE DU MAL” is one of Wallace Stevens’ most technically achieved poems, consisting of 15 sections of varying lengths, alternating rhythms, inconsistent rhymes, and fluctuating registers. It is, in other words, a difficult poem. It is one that, as with most of Stevens’ work, requires the presence of an informed and attentive reader—a reader on whom nuance and subtlety are allowed full sweep and play. The poem in fact is so well structured that the alteration of a word, comma, or line ending can affect how the poem is read and understood. The sheer power of these minute differences becomes especially apparent if we place the poem in the context of its multiple incarnations.

Stevens composed “Esthétique du Mal” between June and July of 1944. He first mentions the poem on June 17 in a letter to John Crowe Ransom, referencing an article by Ransom that had included in it a letter by a soldier “about the relation between poetry and what [the soldier] called pain” (L 468). Stevens comments, “Whatever he may mean, it might be interesting to try to do an esthetique du mal” (L 468). Stevens wrote Ransom again on July 28, this time enclosing a draft of the poem. This second letter highlights some of the poet’s concerns with revision, including his deliberation over use of the word “ensolacings” as well as his belief that the last section “ought to end with an interrogation mark” but that he “punctuated it in such a way as to indicate an abandonment of the question” (L 469). Stevens published “Esthétique du Mal” that same year, Autumn 1944, in *The Kenyon Review*. He also retained a handwritten copy of the poem, as described by George Lensing: “Stevens preserved a holograph in pencil of ‘Esthétique du Mal,’ written on legal-size note pads” (139). A brief comparison between the holograph and *The Kenyon Review* edition reveals the degree to which Stevens revised the poem. These differences also highlight the critical value of placing “Esthétique du Mal” in the context of its various editions.

We can look briefly, for instance, at the closing lines of section I. Upon considering Vesuvius' ability to consume "the utmost earth," the speaker contemplates the relationship between the natural world and human pain. The holograph reads:

This is part of the sublimity
From which we shrink because we seem involved.
But the total past felt nothing when destroyed. (1)¹

Stevens altered these lines for *The Kenyon Review* edition:

This is a part of the sublime
From which we shrink. And yet, except for us,
The total past felt nothing when destroyed. (489)

Both versions suggest the indifference of nature to human suffering, though they exhibit substantive and formal variations. The holograph employs a simple inversion, from suggesting that we "seem" involved to revealing the "But" that undercuts our role. *The Kenyon Review* edition replaces the clause "because we seem involved" with "And yet, except for us," while the "But" is removed. The directness of the nonrestrictive phrase "except for us" overtly isolates and limits human suffering in a way that parallels yet surpasses the "seem." The clause also adds an extra level of coherence through its repetition of lines 16–17: "Except for us, Vesuvius might consume / In solid fire the utmost earth. . . ." We can link these substantive variations to formal ones, including the use of a period after "shrink" as well as bracketing commas around "except for us." Both devices effectively slow our reading, thereby calling greater attention to the subject of human pain; in the process of reading, however, we learn that human pain actually garnered no attention by the "total past," which "felt nothing."

We could continue to compare the two editions, discussing how their formal and substantive variations give rise to new readings, new interpretations, and ultimately new experiences. But to examine only two versions of "Esthétique du Mal" would be to overlook the existence of three other, equally intriguing editions. Although the poem first appeared in 1944, its publication history actually spans over a decade, finding later expression in 1945 in a limited Cummington Press edition; in 1947, in *Transport to Summer (TS)*; and yet again in 1954, in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (CP)*.² Each edition brings with it variations, be they in word choice and phrasing or punctuation and layout. We can better understand and appreciate these variations by placing the poem's major editions in critical conversation.

This comparative examination also presents a useful academic sticking point: an opportunity to address the tendency among literary scholars to focus on substantive rather than formal variations. This bias is especially

pertinent to a discussion of “*Esthétique du Mal*,” given that substantive differences—by which I mean variations in word choice and phrasing—are confined to the initial shift from the holograph to *The Kenyon Review* edition, while subsequent editions consist exclusively of formal differences in punctuation and layout. This bias makes sense to some extent, given that differences in punctuation and layout are not only difficult to pin down but may just as well result from editorial decisions as they do from authorial intentions. A cautious critic, then, would do well to avoid variations that hover in this hazy middle ground. Yet as E. A. Levenston reminds us, this tactic runs the risk of diminishing the poem under examination. In *The Stuff of Literature: Physical Aspects of Texts and Their Relation to Literary Meaning*, Levenston notes that critics often fail “to take into consideration the contributions to meaning made by punctuation, by typographical layout, by choice of spelling where choice exists, by patterns of sound—in short, by all the *physical*, substantial manifestations of language” (1–2). This practice, I would argue, is akin to reading only half of a poem—or play or novel or essay—and then proceeding to make an argument concerning the entire work.

One way to anticipate these critical pitfalls is to regard the literary text as an experience. Stanley Fish perhaps best articulates this position with his concept of affective stylistics, insisting that literature is not “an object, a thing-in-itself, but an *event*, something that *happens* to, and with the participation of, the reader. And it is this event, this happening—all of it and not anything that could be said about it or any information one might take away from it—that is, I would argue, the *meaning*” (72). According to this view, critics need not focus solely on substantive differences, nor set about attempting to decipher an author’s intentional design; rather, they should seek to treat substantive and formal variations with equal weight by practicing what Fish calls “a responsibility to language in all of its aspects” (92).

Stevens was a proponent of this responsibility. He commented to Robert Pack in December of 1954, less than six months before his death: “That a man’s work should remain indefinite is often intentional” (*L* 863). He would extend this notion of indefiniteness to his poetry, as in “The Creations of Sound”:

Better without an author, without a poet,

Or having a separate author, a different poet,
An accretion from ourselves. . . . (*CP* 310–11)

In the context of “*Esthétique du Mal*,” this view of literature as experience urges us to recognize that a single difference in one edition of the poem marks it as an experience, or accretion, distinguishable from any other edition of the poem. Whether these differences are substantive or formal, intentional or accidental, they are nonetheless real: readers can perceive

them and are influenced by them. Five editions of “Esthétique du Mal” therefore constitute five different experiences, if not five different poems.

With this perspective in mind, I return to my claim for placing “Esthétique du Mal” in the context of its multiple incarnations. Instead of using one edition to arrive at a single and clear-cut interpretation, this essay places five editions in conversation so that we might better understand and appreciate nuance, subtlety, and poetic possibility.

II

As I have already indicated, Stevens composed “Esthétique du Mal” between June and July of 1944 on legal-size note pads. He explains in an interview with Edwin Honig, “I was writing on a pad of paper, and the contents of each sheet became a separate stanza. Some had more lines than others—I didn’t bother to count them up” (12). This information provides some account of the poem’s development, but it might also help to review the key events surrounding the poem’s successive publications. Stevens first published the poem in the Autumn 1944 issue of *The Kenyon Review*; he released a second edition less than a year later through the Cummington Press. Stevens and pen-and-ink illustrator Paul Wightman Williams signed forty copies of this deluxe printing, entitled *Esthétique du Mal*, which sported hand-colored illustrations printed on “Van Gelder woven paper from the Netherlands” (L 503); three hundred unsigned copies were printed from “Centaur types on Pace paper from Italy” (L 503). Layout is key: the poem’s 15 sections were allowed their own page, so that the book took on a fairly prominent 26 cm size. Stevens found the copies “attractive,” remarking to publisher Harry Duncan, “The Cummington Press is very much my dish: it is because I like your work so much that the two books printed by you have come about” (L 523).³

“Esthétique du Mal” would enter a third publication two years later, becoming part of *Transport to Summer*. The Knopf release was six centimeters smaller than the Cummington Press edition, meaning that the poem’s 15 sections had to be divided. Knopf also chose not to reprint the illustrations. Stevens enjoyed this edition as well, remarking to Knopf in February 1947: “I think the book, as a book, is a lollapalooza. . . . I like it very much and hope that it brings good luck to all of us” (L 547). *Transport to Summer* sold fairly well, but Stevens’ work would not find immense notoriety until the publication of *The Collected Poems* in 1954. Though the Knopf staff relied on earlier editions of Stevens’ poetry, *The Collected Poems* contained numerous variations. Stevens had a negative response to the edition, saying that he looked forward to it “rather dismally” (L 839). His critics, however, reacted by giving him both a National Book Award and a Pulitzer Prize. Such accolades led scholars such as John Newcomb to comment: “It was now thoroughly possible to assert—and for many, impossible not to admit—that Stevens was central to twentieth-century American poetry” (173).

Stevens' canonical status led to a similar canonization of the *Collected Poems*, evidenced in part through its use as the primary text for Thomas Walsh's concordance as well as the Wallace Stevens Society's on-line concordance and *The Wallace Stevens Journal*. Although it is certainly plausible to rely on the *Collected Poems* edition of a poem such as "Esthétique du Mal," it is also fruitful to read the poem across its five major editions. This latter choice requires us to recognize the impossibility of properly addressing each variation in each of the five editions within the scope of a single essay. Therefore, the remainder of this article serves as an introductory examination of a select series of variations—those that give some sense of the different experiences made possible by each edition of the poem.

Where better to begin this comparison than with the poem's initial line. The holograph opens:

He was at Naples writing letters home. . . . (1)

This line appears verbatim in the subsequent *Kenyon Review*, *Transport to Summer*, and *Collected Poems* editions. Its content seems simple enough: an unidentified male resides in one location as he composes letters for those who live elsewhere. The Cummington edition provides a slightly varied presentation:

He was at Naples
writing letters home. . . . (Cummington 1)

In this version, the poem is literally extended: a single line is split into two. Admittedly, the line break is necessitated by the accompanying pen-and-ink illustration; nevertheless, this variation in layout gives rise to an alternate reading experience. Specifically, the line break forces us to read more slowly, since "writing" no longer joins the two phrases but now serves as the opening word of an entirely separate line. More important, the geography of the poem mirrors the experience of the unidentified male. The minor separation of "Naples" and "home" creates a literal distance on the page that subtly emphasizes the degree of physical separation between Naples and the rather vague reference to "home." This distance is further accentuated when the Cummington edition is placed alongside the unbroken line present in the holograph, *Kenyon*, *TS*, and *CP* editions.

Section I then moves to the image of an indifferent and destructive Vesuvius. The holograph edition describes the scene as follows:

Vesuvius might consume
In solid fire the utmost earth and no one
Suffer pain (ignoring the cocks that crow us up
To die)[.] (1)

Stevens altered these lines with the poem's initial publication—a revision that has held throughout all subsequent editions. The sentiment is largely unchanged, though the mode of expression is notably different:

Vesuvius might consume
In solid fire the utmost earth and know
No pain (ignoring the cocks that crow us up
To die).

(*Kenyon* 489; *Cummington* 1; *TS* 38; *CP* 314)

The key difference lies in the shift from “no one / Suffer” to “know / No pain.” Both formulations involve a negation, which is in keeping with the larger negation between Vesuvius and the utmost earth as well as nature and human pain. The negation in the holograph edition references the amorphous “one.” This formulation, though intriguing, lacks the argumentative thrust that pervades the rest of poem: the “one” *does* suffer pain; it is Vesuvius that does not. The revision presented in the *Kenyon*, *Cummington*, *TS*, and *CP* editions offers a different experience by 1) aligning the negation with Vesuvius, and 2) presenting this negation as a homonym on “know” and “no.” The second line in this version ends with an affirmation of knowledge, while the third line begins with a sound-alike antonym of negation. This witty coupling is further strengthened both in sound and sentiment by the word “ignoring”—a parallel that the holograph edition possesses but with less effect.

Section I contains yet another substantive revision: a shift from the noun “sublimity” to the adjective “sublime.” The holograph reads:

This is part of the sublimity
From which we shrink because we seem involved. (1)

The revision, which initially appeared in the *Kenyon* edition and has remained in all subsequent editions, appears as:

This is a part of the sublime
From which we shrink.
(*Kenyon* 489; *Cummington* 1; *TS* 38; *CP* 314)

Stevens uses the adjective “sublime” as a noun—a usage that parallels the unidentified male’s earlier reading of “paragraphs / On the sublime.” As with the repetition of “except for us,” the revision to “sublime” provides an extra level of coherence. The word also diminishes the role of human agency, as “the sublime” suggests a greater degree of omnipotence than “sublimity,” given its historical and philosophical connotations. The shift from “part” to “a part” adds to this diminishment by reducing the

human role within the natural world even further: to merely “a part” of the larger and encompassing sublime.

This sense of diminishment occurs yet again in Section II when the unidentified male listens to the warblings of distant birds, which he believes are somehow evocative of his disconsolate mood. The holograph, *Kenyon*, and *TS* editions describe the birdsong as

the syllables
That would form themselves, in time, and communicate
The intelligence of his despair. . . .
(Holograph 2; *Kenyon* 490; *TS* 39)

These lines lay the foundation for the poem’s larger claims that human beings are mistaken to anthropomorphize their surrounding environment. We fail to recognize that nature is indifferent to our existence—that, “except for us, / The total past felt nothing when destroyed” (Holograph 1). Placement of the word “communicate” is therefore crucial as it embodies the nonexistent reality in which we invest so much faith. This disconnection is strengthened in the context of the Cummington edition:

the syllables
That would form themselves, in time, and
communicate
The intelligence of his despair. . . .
(Cummington 2)

The accompanying illustration intervenes yet again to alter layout, this time pushing the word “communicate” onto its own line and in the process generating an alternate reading experience. Our reading speed again decreases as we are forced to contemplate the weightiness of the verb “communicate.” The use of “and” to end the line creates a gap, a pause, and a desire for further knowledge that we can fulfill only by proceeding to the prominent one-word line. We might compare this effect to the “and communicate” formulation in the holograph, *Kenyon*, and *TS* editions. Although “communicate” still receives a fair amount of attention by virtue of being the final word in the line, the phrase nonetheless presents a complete thought. Though we still desire to know *what* is communicated, the level of suspense is diminished as the “and communicate” formulation provides a greater degree of gratification. We can link these findings to yet another version available in the *Collected Poems* edition. Here a new line break is made possible by the dictates of font size and column width. The word “communicate” is at issue once more:

the syllables
That would form themselves, in time, and communi-

cate
The intelligence of his despair. . . . (CP 314)

This layout further accentuates the vain human endeavor to personify nature, given its representation via the harsh, visually unappealing hyphenation of “communicate.” The hyphen dramatically slows our reading speed, since we must first reconnect the word and then attempt to make sense of it. The hyphen also emphasizes the flawed nature of communication, since the very word that connotes connection is itself fragmented. When placed within the context of the poem, this instance of failure (physically embodied on the page) is indicative of our larger inability to bridge human pain and the indifference of nature.

Section III introduces another type of grammatical revision: the exclamation point. Whereas the hyphen effectively dramatizes the pathos of human suffering, the exclamation point undercuts it by crossing the line into melodrama. The first instance occurs as the speaker contemplates the loss of belief in both heaven and hell. Our attentions turn to the earthly stage as we learn that all pain and all pleasure

Are one, and here, O terra infidel.
(Holograph 3; TS 40; CP 315)

The preceding line appears in the initial holograph as well as the subsequent *TS* and *CP* editions. Both the *Kenyon* and *Cummington* editions, however, employ an exclamation point, so that the line reads:

Are one, and here, O terra infidel!
(*Kenyon* 491; *Cummington* 3)

The variation may seem slight, yet it significantly modifies the tone of poem by transforming the line’s sobering mood into a fitful one. This mood is present again seven lines later as the speaker laments the too human nature of God. Here the revision is twofold, altering both the beginning and end of the line. The holograph reads:

But that he would not pity us so much! (3)

This presentation changed with the publication of the *Kenyon* edition:

If only he would not pity us so much, . . . (491)

The phrases “But that” and “If only” convey a similar sentiment, with a key difference being that the former is somewhat affected and dramatic. The exclamation point therefore fits the performative nature of the line. In the *Kenyon* edition, as well as all subsequent editions, the coupling of “If

only” and a comma also fits, though not in a performative but in a meditative manner, since the lines do not crescendo so much as they gently propose. The reading experience, then, varies from a mode of distress to one of studied consideration, all depending upon which edition one reads.

Experience is at issue yet again in section IX when variations in font size and column width alter the poem’s line endings. The speaker here describes the dangers of totalizing systems, be they religious or scientific, and argues that knowledge itself can become such a system. Instead of perceiving nature as an infinite series of transcendent objects, we too often confine our impressions. This confinement culminates in the purposeful limiting of our senses. The following lines, which are identical in the holograph, *Kenyon*, *TS*, and *CP* editions, capture this predicament:

To lose sensibility, to see what one sees,
As if sight had not its own miraculous thrift,
To hear only what one hears, one meaning alone. . . .
(Holograph 9; *Kenyon* 497; *TS* 47; *CP* 320)

The last line is of particular interest as it equates sensory perception with our acquisition of knowledge—a process negatively portrayed through the use of “only,” “one,” and “alone.”

Although these lines convey a pronounced degree of emotion, they can be understood somewhat differently if we incorporate the Cummington edition in which a slight variation in layout has a dramatic effect:

To lose sensibility, to see what one sees,
As if sight had not its own miraculous thrift,
To hear only what one hears, one meaning
alone. (Cummington 9)

As with the placement of “communicate” in a single line, the presentation of “alone” in this edition certainly draws greater attention. Of greater significance, however, is the temporary alignment of form and content. As the speaker details the negative effects of sensory limitation, the poem’s physical appearance gestures toward a similar form of limitation and isolation. Not only is the word “alone” afforded its own line, but also the meaning of the word is such that another resonance exists; namely, “alone” is alone.

Section XIII returns our focus to substantive differences. Here the speaker describes our subjective creation of reality. The holograph presents this scene as follows:

And it may be
That in his Mediterranean cloister a man,
Reclining, eased of desire, establishes

The visible, a zone of zebraed shade
And oranges. . . . (13)

Every subsequent edition of "Esthétique du Mal" has varied from this initial presentation, appearing as:

And it may be
That in his Mediterranean cloister a man,
Reclining, eased of desire, establishes
The visible, a zone of blue and orange
Versicolorings. . . .
(*Kenyon* 501; *Cumington* 13; *TS* 51; *CP* 324)

Both versions address the changeable nature of perception by depicting a "zone" of shifting appearances. In the holograph version, the zone contains light as well as dark via the "zebraed shade"; the zone also contains oranges, which grammatically can refer to a range of orange colors or the actual fruit. The result is a series of doublings and near doublings: light and dark, a fruit as well as its colors. In subsequent editions, the zone specifically contains the colors "blue and orange," with no subtle references to animals and fruit. Yet this version engages in doubling via the word "Versicolorings." The *Oxford English Dictionary* has no entry for this exact word, but defines the noun "versicolour" according to John Ash's 1775 *The New and Complete Dictionary of the English Language*: "Versicolour, a variegated or changeable colour." The word therefore undercuts the directness of the preceding line, since the so-called "zone of blue and orange" may not actually contain these particular colors but rather allows for a spectrum.

Section XIV asks readers to consider the nature of perception once again, this time via the "logical lunatic." One such individual is Konstantinov, who interrupts our contemplation of natural phenomena, such as "a lake, with clouds," by imposing "the lunatic of one idea" (Holograph 14; *Kenyon* 502; *TS* 52). Konstantinov would thus "not be aware of the lake," for his ideas consume any perception of it (Holograph 14; *Kenyon* 502; *TS* 52). This notion holds true for the clouds as well. Yet because of variations in font size and column width, we have the opportunity to examine a new line break. The holograph, *Kenyon*, and *TS* editions read:

He would be the lunatic of one idea
In a world of ideas, who would have all the people
Live, work, suffer and die in that idea
In a world of ideas. He would not be aware of the clouds,
Lighting the martyrs of logic with white fire.
(Holograph 14; *Kenyon* 502; *TS* 52)

The lines are fairly straightforward, presenting Konstantinov in a state of perceptive blindness. When we examine these lines as they appear in both the Cummington and *CP* editions, an experiential difference emerges in the fourth line:

He would be the lunatic of one idea
In a world of ideas, who would have all the people
Live, work, suffer and die in that idea
In a world of ideas. He would not be aware of the
clouds,
Lighting the martyrs of logic with white fire.
(Cummington 14; *CP* 325)

Once again, the reading process is slowed. As we proceed to the end of the fourth line, we find ourselves in a position oddly similar to that of Konstantinov, given that we too are unaware—in this case, unaware of what he is unaware of. Thus, the poem's layout has the effect of temporarily aligning readers with the very figure they are supposed to loathe. Although readers of the holograph, *Kenyon*, and *TS* editions are likely to experience a similar alignment, the additional line break in the Cummington and *CP* editions effectively heightens this effect.

Section XV continues to address the nature of sensory perception via the speaker's claim for the need to reformulate thought. The means of achieving this reformulation, we learn, is through a reevaluation of our senses. The holograph, *Kenyon*, Cummington, and *TS* editions read:

One might have thought of sight, but who could think
Of what it sees, for all the ill it sees?
(Holograph 15; *Kenyon* 503; Cummington 15; *TS* 53)

The lines are formally taut, both exhibiting iambic pentameter. This metrical maneuver makes sense: as the poem nears its conclusion and its content begins to achieve clarity, so too does its form. This instance of metrical precision seems mirrored in the poem's diction. Although readers of "Es-thétique du Mal" frequently encounter erudite, polysyllabic words such as "fulgurations," "transmutation," and "unsubjugated," these concluding lines are composed exclusively of common, monosyllabic words (a total of 20)—a construction that creates a feeling of immediacy and simplicity. Of course, this formal precision is anything but accessible—a reality forcefully emphasized by the initial line ending. Concluding with "think" exacerbates the level of suspense as readers desire to know what is paired with "sight"; that is, what to think *of*, causing us to continue eagerly to the following line. After we arrive, however, knowledge remains frustrated, as we are provided not with a concrete noun, but with the phrase "what it sees." Readers are then asked to consider, not the act

of sight, but the object of sight, which is a series of ills. Yet within this confusion is the glimpse of an answer: namely, that true sight is the ability to see “all the ill” as well as all the good. This realization is compromised by the sheer difficulty of attainment, giving way to what Charles Altieri has called “both a revelation and a test” (169). Although Altieri specifically refers to the poem “Earthy Anecdote,” his observations also describe “Esthétique du Mal,” which stands as a poem that provides “a revelation of a logic fundamental to the imagination and a test of what one might go on to see if one were willing to persist in the inhuman mode of seeing required by the poem” (169).

If we allow these insights to intermingle with the *CP* edition, a slightly different reading becomes possible. Here variations in layout again give way to a new line break:

One might have thought of sight, but who could
think
Of what it sees, for all the ill it sees? (*CP* 326)

The dangling “think” undermines the precision of the first line by altering the metrical form. Yet the word “think” retains its relative stress in the second line, thereby calling even more attention to it. This placement also heightens suspense, as the line literally cuts off, leading us to wonder what other sense we might employ, what else we *could* consider. Yet our frustration escalates as the line continues, since we simply shift from the past “thought” to the present “think,” thereby making even more palpable the question posed in the earlier editions of what to think of. The key here is that the placement of “think,” as with the previous instance of “clouds,” slightly yet intriguingly alters our perception of the poem. Although readers of earlier editions certainly undergo similar mental gymnastics, layout in the *Collected Poems* affords an alternate reading—one that can only be fully appreciated when placed in the context of multiple editions.

A final example of textual variation also begs to be placed in critical conversation. As readers near the closing lines, they encounter what is perhaps the speaker’s most enthusiastic claim for the expansive possibilities of the imagination. The holograph version appears as follows:

And out of what one sees and hears and out
Of what one feels, who could have thought to make
So many selves, so many sensuous worlds,
As if the air, the mid-day air swarmed with
The metaphysical changes that occur,
Merely in living as and where we live. (15)

The physical senses again take center stage as vehicles for the exercise of the imagination. Beyond simply upholding the imagination as a means

of expanding perception, however, these lines deify it as creator. Here then we encounter perhaps the most pivotal lines of the poem, as we are asked to imagine the imagination in its most extreme incarnation. It is important to note, then, that our perception of these lines varies depending upon what edition we read, as each contains substantive and formal variations.

We can begin by comparing the holograph with the *Kenyon* and *Cummington* editions:

And out of what one sees and hears and out
Of what one feels, who could have thought to make
So many selves, so many sensuous worlds—
As if the air, the mid-day air, was swarming
With the metaphysical changes that occur,
Merely in living as and where we live.

(*Kenyon* 503; *Cummington* 15)

The substantive difference here concerns the shift from the past tense “swarmed with” to the progressive past “was swarming / With.” These differences in tense are essentially temporal differences: the past tense more specifically locates the act of swarming in time whereas the progressive tense allows for an ongoing sense of swarming. The lines also sound different, with “swarmed” lacking the buzz-like “s” consonance of “was swarming.” These variations are also linked to formal differences, focused entirely in the third line of this passage, which bears the weight of the speaker’s enthusiastic claim for the imagination. Here readers are encouraged to consider the imagination as creator of “So many selves, so many sensuous worlds—.” The magnitude of this assertion cannot be overstated, a detail perhaps best indicated by the use of a concluding em dash in the *Kenyon* and *Cummington* editions. More dramatic than the comma in the holograph edition, the em dash requires readers to consider, at least for a moment longer, the weightiness of the speaker’s revelation of the imagination as creator. Coupled with the time it takes to proceed to the next line, the em dash notably affords the poem a greater sense of gravity.

We can link this reading experience with that of the *TS* and *CP* editions:

And out of what one sees and hears and out
Of what one feels, who could have thought to make
So many selves, so many sensuous worlds,
As if the air, the mid-day air, was swarming
With the metaphysical changes that occur,
Merely in living as and where we live.

(*TS* 53; *CP* 326)

Here we see a synthesis of the holograph, *Kenyon*, and *Cummington* editions. The progressive past tense “was swarming” remains, meaning that

the “s” consonance is retained. Yet these editions revert to the holograph presentation of a comma instead of an em dash. Although the comma certainly requires readers to pause, this hesitation only approximates the duration afforded by the em dash, thus altering the level of gravity and our perception of the third line.

III

The preceding examination was introductory in that, of several dozen possible variations in “Esthétique du Mal,” I chose twelve. Not only could I have included more examples, but also I might have extended the depth of the twelve instances by engaging in closer readings. My point is that this examination could be greatly expanded as each variation brings with it a host of new subtleties, new readings, and new experiences.

If we enlarge our concerns from one poem to the whole of Wallace Stevens’ oeuvre, the possibilities radiate exponentially. Consider the following statistics: *Collected Poems* contains roughly two hundred and seventy-four previously published poems. Each poem is available in an earlier, uncollected form as published by Knopf, from *Harmonium* in 1923 to *The Auroras of Autumn* in 1950. We might also include the numerous poems that initially appeared in journals such as *Poetry*, *The Kenyon Review*, and *The Dial*. Almost every edition of every poem will yield some degree of variation in font size, column width, and overall layout, if not substantive differences in diction and phrasing. Thus, we are confronted with the reality that hundreds of new readings exist. Finally, Stevens also released *Three Academic Pieces* as well as his twenty-eight-page opus *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* in similarly illustrated Cummings Press editions. Although numerous scholars regard the latter poem as Stevens’ crowning achievement, their appreciation is compromised by a failure to examine the work in the context of its varied incarnations. Bearing this shortcoming in mind, we might ask: how can we lay any claim to Stevens’ poetry if we overlook its complex history? To quote the poet himself, why do we allow ourselves to die for “one idea / In a world of ideas” (CP 325)?

One answer, of course, is efficiency. How could any scholar expect to construct a coherent argument if required to hold upward of five texts in suspension at all times? To some extent, any reading would never move beyond the level of fruitful indeterminacy. To address this concern, I defer again to Stanley Fish, who observes:

In the analysis of a reading experience, when does one come to the point? The answer is “never,” or, no sooner than the pressure to do so becomes unbearable (psychologically). Coming to the point is the goal of a criticism that believes in content, in extractable meaning, in the utterance as a repository. Coming to the point fulfills a need that most literature deliberately frustrates (if we open ourselves to it), the need to simplify and close.

Coming to the point should be resisted, and in its small way,
this method will help you to resist. (89)

By placing numerous editions of Stevens' poetry in conversation, by pushing ourselves to examine substantive and formal differences with equal concern, we are engaging in an invaluable act of textual criticism. Though it is certainly true that this act makes it difficult to come smoothly and easily to the point, it is also true that this type of criticism brings to light all manner of poetic nuance and subtlety, thereby encouraging us to recognize that, indeed, "these minutiae mean more" (Holograph 5; *Kenyon* 493; *Cummington* 5; *TS* 42; *CP* 317).

The University of Texas at Austin

Notes

¹ Both the holograph and *Cummington* editions lack printed page numbers. However, each section is afforded its own page, so that section 1 corresponds with what would be page 1, section 2 corresponds with what would be page 2, and so on. Page number citations for both editions, therefore, are drawn from these correspondences.

² I did not include Holly Stevens' *The Palm at the End of the Mind* or the Library of America's *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose* because these editions do not contain any variations that differ from those present in the five previous editions of "Esthétique du Mal."

³ Stevens sought out *Cummington* Press two years earlier, in 1942, for a similarly illustrated edition of *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*.

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From Deconstruction to Decreation: Wallace Stevens' Notes Toward a Poetics of Nobility

AYON ROY

[Simone Weil] says that decreation is making pass from the created to the uncreated, but that destruction is making pass from the created to nothingness. Modern reality is a reality of decreation, in which our revelations are not the revelations of belief, but the precious portents of our own powers.

—“The Relations between Poetry and Painting”

HAROLD BLOOM SHREWDLY observed nearly three decades ago that many of Wallace Stevens' poems are “themselves more advanced *as interpretation* than our criticism as yet has gotten to be” (168). Bloom's pronouncement seems in little danger of becoming dated. Indeed, Stevens criticism betrays a chronic inability to handle adequately the self-reflexivity of a poetic corpus that so insistently concerns the act of reading poetry itself. Such poems as “Large Red Man Reading” and “The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm” constitute self-reflexive meditations on what reading involves and how one is to go about doing it. They are, in short, “allegories of reading,” to borrow Paul de Man's phrase. Perhaps Stevens' most elaborate and sustained allegory of reading is his long poem “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” (1942).

Accordingly, I begin the essay by reading “Notes” in de Manian fashion as a text that so foregrounds its own rhetoricity that it frustrates any attempt at determinate understanding. We will find, however, that the poem itself anticipates and proleptically deconstructs the very deconstructive reading that it seems to invite.¹ This “endlessly elaborating” (CP 486) poem about the writing and reading of poetry out-de Mans de Manian readings by ruthlessly subsuming even the most “advanced” interpretations, revealing them to be nothing more than otiose, merely academic speculations. A fresh examination of the well-known eighth canto of part III of “Notes” will show how the poem, without collapsing into romantic ideology, decisively transcends its own elaborate allegory by developing a version of nobility as a force.

In his essay "The Resistance to Theory," de Man argues for the irreducibly "figural," or rhetorical, dimension of the title of Keats's poem *The Fall of Hyperion*. De Man brilliantly demonstrates how the grammar of the title sanctions at least two equally plausible interpretations: the literal one, which would take the title to mean "Hyperion's Fall," and the figural one, which would read the title as "Hyperion Falling" ("Resistance" 16).

The title "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" is equally figural: each word contributes to a radical indeterminacy in how it is to be interpreted. The phrase "supreme fiction" deserves particular attention since it seems especially fraught with indeterminacy. We might relate it intertextually to Stevens' use of the phrase in his earlier poem "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," in which the meaning of the "supreme fiction" is clear: "Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame" (CP 59). Indeed, such an understanding of the phrase is encouraged by Stevens himself, who remarks in a May 1942 letter to the Cummington Press, the first publisher of "Notes": "By supreme fiction, of course, I mean poetry" (L 407). Moreover, the three main headings of "Notes"—"It Must Be Abstract," "It Must Change," and "It Must Give Pleasure"—make it all too easy to read the "It" as "Poetry." But in a December 1942 letter to a friend, Stevens crucially qualifies his earlier statement: "It is implicit in the title [of "Notes"] that there can be such a thing as a supreme fiction. . . . I have no idea of the form that a supreme fiction would take. . . . Of course, in the long run, poetry would be the supreme fiction" (L 430). Shortly thereafter, in a candid letter to another friend, Stevens goes even further, altogether rejecting his earlier identification of poetry with the supreme fiction. "I think I said in my last letter to you that the Supreme Fiction is not poetry," Stevens writes, "but I also said that I don't know what it is going to be. Let us think about it and not say that our abstraction is this, that or the other" (L 438).

This progressive broadening in the construal of the supreme fiction in Stevens' own mind is mirrored in the reader's understanding of the supreme fiction upon confronting "Notes." That is, while the reader is invited readily to identify the supreme fiction with poetry, it soon appears that such a reading defuses, or tames, the essential figurality of the supreme fiction. The reader of "Notes," Stevens seems to suggest, must exercise something like a Keatsian negative capability: the supreme fiction could be poetry, but it could also be a host of other things—in short, any important human abstraction. What de Man says of Keats's title applies just as well to the title of "Notes": "it matters a great deal how we read the title, as an exercise not only in semantics, but in what the text actually does to us" ("Resistance" 16).

A longer essay would attempt to demonstrate that the irreducible figurality of this single potent phrase, "supreme fiction," is a particular instance of the underlying structural principle of the poem as a whole: namely, its insistent refusal of determinate understanding. I hope it will suffice here to examine how this structural principle operates in a particu-

lar canto—namely, the first three tercets of the second canto of part I of “Notes”:

It is the celestial ennui of apartments
That sends us back to the first idea, the quick
Of this invention; and yet so poisonous

Are the ravishments of truth, so fatal to
The truth itself, the first idea becomes
The hermit in a poet’s metaphors,

Who comes and goes and comes and goes all day.
May there be an ennui of the first idea?
What else, prodigious scholar, should there be? (CP 381)

This difficult passage has elicited a number of competing interpretations, depending on how figurally the passage is read. Bloom entirely defuses its figurality by interpreting the passage literally. Citing a prose remark in which Stevens expresses his distaste for “housing projects,” Bloom astonishingly interprets the “celestial ennui of apartments” in terms of Stevens’ “distaste at being surrounded by apartment-dwellers” (179). Joseph Riddel interprets the passage in a more figural manner: “the apartmented world, like the apartmented mind, gives birth to desires for greater knowledge” (*Clairvoyant Eye* 170).

Yet what this passage seems to demand is neither a literal nor a figural reading, but a *meta*figural reading. According to de Man, writing is “metafigural” insofar as “it writes figuratively about figures” (*Allegories* 14). In the case of this passage from Stevens, the already figural notion of “the first idea” is itself troped: “the first idea becomes / The hermit in a poet’s metaphors, / Who comes and goes and comes and goes all day.” What seems in the first tercet to be a straightforward backward tracing of the “celestial ennui of apartments” to the source of this ennui—the “first idea”—is hopelessly complicated by the ensuing tercets: this supposedly “first idea,” or ultimate origin, proves to be tainted with the very ennui of which it was supposed to have been the source. Not only must we renounce our earlier Riddelian interpretation, but also we are faced with the unenviable task of making sense of the speaker’s mystifying identification of “the first idea” with a peripatetic “hermit.” The convolutions of the passage evidently strain to the breaking point Riddel’s capacity for cogent paraphrase: “The push-pull of experience, the exchanges of self and reality, is prologue to the perceiving of a first idea; yet it is experience which stands between us and idea” (*Clairvoyant Eye* 170). Indeed, at the metafigural level, tracking the evasions and transformations of the “first idea” is shown to be a futile exercise. The point is not that the passage’s metafigurality allows us to adjudicate between competing interpreta-

tions—so that we can judge, from this loftier height, that Bloom’s and Riddel’s readings are unsuccessful—but, rather, that this metafigurality exemplifies the very impossibility of settling on a successful interpretation at all. In uncanny anticipation of the dutiful literary critic’s distress, the speaker seems ruthlessly to revel in and mock his exegetical failings and failings: “May there be an ennui of the first idea? / What else, prodigious scholar, should there be?”

The reader—the “prodigious scholar”—soon realizes, to his consternation, that his very efforts to penetrate the text’s opacity are themselves incessantly troped and parodied throughout the poem. The trope of the “academic,” which pervades “Notes,” is consistently aligned with reduction, mystification, and sophistry. The poem begins, in fact, with the professorial injunction, “Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea / Of this invention” (CP 380). But this apparently triangular structure, in which the reader complacently witnesses the speaker of “Notes” lecturing to a young ephebe, quickly collapses into a tutorial uncomfortably directed to the reader-ephebe himself. For instance, later in this first canto, the ephebe is told not to falsify the sun by naming it: “The sun / Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be / In the difficulty of what it is to be” (CP 381). Yet, in the next canto concerning the “celestial ennui of apartments,” as we have just seen, it is the reader-ephebe who is caught in the act of attempting to tame the irrepressible metafigurality of the passage—with Bloom and Riddel—by fixing it in some reductive paraphrase.

As if to prevent us from resting too comfortably on our de Manian perch, however, the speaker later insists that the very celebration of the art object’s fundamental resistance to paraphrase proves to be equally academic. In the seventh canto of the second part of “Notes,” the assumption of our relative superiority with respect to other reductive readings of the poem is itself troped and subsumed: our interpretative superiority is a matter of “degrees of perception in the scholar’s dark” (CP 395). Making supersubtle distinctions between different interpretative approaches becomes futile once we realize that all such approaches are subsumed under “the scholar’s dark.” But how are we to escape the benighted condition of the scholar? An ecstatic moment in the seventh canto of part I of “Notes” gestures toward an answer:

Perhaps there are moments of awakening,
Extreme, fortuitous, personal, in which

We more than awaken, sit on the edge of sleep,
As on an elevation, and behold
The academies like structures in a mist. (CP 386)

We can no longer remain satisfied with the careful recording of the text’s indeterminacies, since we would be guilty of the kind of semantic reifica-

tion that we were at such pains to disavow. The poem's indeterminacy is in danger of becoming its ultimate meaning, thereby canceling its essential metafigurality. We must remain open, the speaker seems to suggest, to the possibility of these "moments of awakening" that call into question even the most rigorous and responsible academic readings of the text.

The last canto of "Notes" evokes the possibility that poetry itself could be the privileged site of such a "moment of awakening": "They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne. / We shall return at twilight from the lecture / Pleased that the irrational is rational, / Until flicked by feeling, in a gilded street, / I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo" (CP 406–07). The genuine insights of our earlier rhetorical reading of "Notes"—that the supreme fiction is and is not poetry, that the "first idea" is and is not ordinary—are the stuff of lectures at the Sorbonne (or at Yale). But the de Man in all of us must not rest complacently in this recognition that "the irrational is rational." We do not allow the poem fully to come into its own—to become a "fluent mundo"—until we allow ourselves to be "flicked by feeling." The astonishing word "flicked," easily the most heavily stressed word in the line, exceeds the confines of mere onomatopoeia, literally *flicking* the reader into the very experiential condition that the line projects as possibility.

What this line expresses and instantiates in miniature—that clever academic readings must not foreclose the possibility of being "flicked by feeling"—is more fully and successfully realized in the eighth canto of part III of "Notes," to which we will soon turn. But we must first briefly examine the canto immediately preceding it, which sets the stage for the full appreciation of the eighth canto. After once again parodying the pretensions of academics—having them surpass "the most literate owl, the most erudite / Of elephants"—the speaker in the seventh canto resumes a tone of gravity as he asserts, "But to impose is not / To discover" (CP 403). In a bold act of proleptically subsuming the half-century of bewildered and often contradictory commentary that this poem was to generate, the speaker raises the troubling possibility that our supposedly fortuitous discovery of irreducible indeterminacies in the structure of the text was, after all, rigged in advance. With increasing urgency over the course of the canto, however, he insists that genuine discovery is, indeed, possible, not by way of ratiocinative rigor but by its very absence: "To discover winter and know it well, to find, / Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all, / Out of nothing to have come on major weather, / It is possible, possible, possible. It must / Be possible" (CP 404).

But the speaker knows that his repeated insistence on the abstract possibility of discovery is not enough, which is why the merely constative utterances of the seventh canto find their *performative* validation in the next canto:

What am I to believe? If the angel in his cloud,

Serenely gazing at the violet² 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? (CP 404)

"What am I to believe?" The heightening sense of urgency and desperation in the seventh canto reaches its climax in the extraordinary compression of this opening question, in which every syllable is heavily stressed. This question reflects, on one level, the literary critic's despair in the face of a poem that so mercilessly deconstructs our attempts to understand it. But it is also a metaphysical-epistemological question: What supreme fiction is worth believing in? We seem to inhabit the perspective of the angel as we gaze vertiginously into the "violet abyss" of figural poetic language, which calls all fictions—supreme or otherwise—into question. Astonishingly, however, the angel of canto eight is decidedly not vertiginous or despairing: he is "serenely" gazing at the abyss. Understanding the angel's preternatural serenity—and, by implication, the reader's own in reading the poem—will require us to examine quite closely the workings of this canto.

The answer to the opening question takes a complex discursive form: if certain conditions about the angel obtain, then does X obtain? But we miss the point of the passage entirely if we attempt to decipher this passage in such rational terms. In fact, this passage seems precisely designed, at once, to resist the reader's understanding and to bring the reader to a state in which the impulse to understand is held in abeyance—in which questions of rational understanding momentarily lose their claim on us. Take, for example, the third line of canto eight: "Plucks on his strings to pluck abysmal glory." What does it mean for glory to be "abysmal"? How can one pluck glory at all? How are we to understand the "to" in the middle of the line: does it make any sense for an angel to pluck strings *in order to* pluck glory? What seems to be sheer nonsense at the level of rational understanding, however, becomes extraordinarily powerful at the level of what Stevens calls "pure poetry" (L 340). The staccato, onomatopoeic pluckings on the angel's divine instrument flick the reader with feeling in the act of reading, despite the line's grammatical and semantic incoherence.

The dynamic tension in this third line between a discursive and a poetic logic is repeated throughout the passage. Although it is difficult to

understand what the speaker means by the evening's "revelations" in the fourth line, we appreciate its verbal and rhythmic appositeness rather than dwell on its semantic complications. In the next line, we encounter an archaic word in the speaker's description of the angel's "spredden wings." But the phrase, far from being jarring, works perfectly in the passage as it elegantly combines the dual connotations of "spreading" and "reddening." Thus, instead of bothering over precisely how an angel can be in "motionless motion," we savor the subtle rhythmic accelerations that this suddenly non-iambic phrase invites us to participate in.

But a reading that stops here, at what seems to be a systematic privileging of sound over sense, remains vulnerable to the skeptical question posed in an early Stevens poem: "Is the function of the poet here mere sound, / Subtler than the ornatest prophecy, / To stuff the ear?" (CP 144). Surely, one might insist, "pure poetry" needs to be a more capacious concept than a mere reveling in sound; otherwise, it would not be much of an alternative to our earlier reveling in the poem's indeterminacies. Put in terms of the particular architectonics of "Notes," the inadequacy of our reading of the eighth canto thus far lies in its exclusive emphasis on poetry's capacity to give pleasure while neglecting poetry's capacities for abstraction and change.

Fortunately, we need only turn to an essay Stevens published in the same year as "Notes," "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," to appreciate how the angel canto's "luminous melody of proper sound" (CP 404) can serve as the basis for a special kind of nobility. It is uncanny how closely the essay's opening discussion of the experience of reading a passage from Plato's *Phaedrus* resembles our experience of reading the angel canto from "Notes." After citing a long passage from *Phaedrus*, in which Socrates describes "a pair of winged horses and a charioteer" soaring through space, Stevens offers an interpretation of the passage that deserves to be quoted at length:

We recognize at once, in this figure, Plato's pure poetry; and at the same time we recognize what Coleridge called Plato's dear, gorgeous nonsense. The truth is that we have scarcely read the passage before we have identified ourselves with the charioteer, have, in fact, taken his place and, driving his winged horses, are traversing the whole heaven. Then suddenly we remember, it may be, that the soul no longer exists and we droop in our flight and at last settle on the solid ground. The figure becomes antiquated and rustic. (NA 3-4)

Replace "charioteer" with "angel," and we get an accurate account of the experience of reading canto eight from "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction." We have, up to this point, read the angel canto as "dear, gorgeous nonsense." We seem to get so caught up in the "pure poetry" of the canto

that we cannot help but identify ourselves with the angel in the “motionless motion” of his flight. In “Notes,” this sense of identification culminates in the line, “Is it he or is it I that experience this?” (*CP* 404), where the poetic description of the angel’s flight becomes so pure that it seems momentarily inseparable from the angel’s experience itself. The “he” and the “I” suddenly become fluid and permeable subject-positions instead of rigid pronominal markers. But this sense of identification cannot be sustained for long. We suddenly remember that angels no longer exist and we droop in our flight and at last settle on solid ground. What becomes of poetry once we settle on “solid ground”? This is the question Stevens explores in the remainder of his essay, and this is the question we have to confront in order fully to come to terms with the angel canto from “Notes.”

The remainder of the angel canto can be read as an effort to cope with the fact that we are doomed to dwell on “solid ground”:

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.

These external regions, what do we fill them with
Except reflections, the escapades of death,
Cinderella fulfilling herself beneath the roof?
(*CP* 404–05)

Here the “I” becomes the locus for a kind of “majesty” that does not depend on the existence of angels. In the 1948 essay “Imagination as Value,” Stevens specifically faults romanticism for clinging to such “antiquated and rustic” figures: “The imagination is one of the great human powers. The romantic belittles it. . . . [The imagination] is intrepid and eager and the extreme of its achievement lies in abstraction. The achievement of the romantic, on the contrary, lies in minor wish-fulfillments and it is incapable of abstraction” (*NA* 138–39). I would suggest that the latter half of the eighth canto of “Notes” enacts a critique of romanticism in precisely these terms. If the eighth canto opens with the romantic “wish-fulfillment[]” of identification with the angel, the remainder of the canto seeks to overcome such a romantic model of the imagination by abstracting so rigorously from the experience of the canto’s opening stanzas that the

speaker can preserve a sense of “majesty” without remaining committed to untenable wish-fulfillments.³

It must first be acknowledged that, at first glance, the latter half of canto eight—in its apparently wistful evocation of a blissful moment without need—seems to endorse, rather than reject, the distinctly romantic fantasy of momentary self-determination. No doubt this is why critics such as Bloom and Frank Kermode have tended to read the latter half as if it were straightforwardly consistent with the sentiment of the first half. A close examination of the latter half of canto eight is required to discern the subtle ways in which the speaker departs from—and ultimately rejects—the romantic model of the imagination. Notice, first, that the speaker describes this epiphanic moment as one of “*expressible bliss*” (CP 404; emphasis added), signaling a refusal of the romantic subordination of poetry to the ineffable states of mind that it tries to describe or elicit. Here, “Notes” and the “Noble Rider” essay prove to be mutually illuminating. Toward the end of the essay, Stevens writes that the “affirmations of nobility” might afford the poet “that occasional ecstasy, or ecstatic freedom of the mind, which is his special privilege” (NA 35). But this statement has to be read in the context of his earlier definition of poetry as “a revelation in words by means of the words” (NA 33). If Stevens evokes the possibility of an “occasional ecstasy” afforded by poetry, it must be an ecstasy rigorously grounded in the words themselves. Poetry becomes both the means to, and the very content of, revelation in Stevens’ formulation. In his short introduction to *The Necessary Angel*, Stevens neatly captures the fundamental expressibility of the bliss afforded by poetry in his definition of it as a “force capable of bringing about fluctuations in reality in words free from mysticism” (NA viii).

It is equally important to notice that the blissful moment evoked by the speaker has quite a complex relation to “need”: the hour of expressible bliss is one “in which I have / No need, am happy, forget need’s golden hand, / Am satisfied without solacing majesty” (CP 404–05). The “I” seems to have come a long way since the previous line—“Is it he or is it I that experience this?”—where the “I” and the angel seem, for a moment, to be inseparable. Here, for the first time, the “I” seems aggressively to assert its distance from the angel. To counter the fact that the angel “needs nothing but deep space,” the speaker at first offers a polemical overstatement in an attempt to outdo the angel: the speaker’s moment of bliss, by contrast, is one in which he has *no* need. But the subsequent clauses subtly qualify this initial claim: “am happy, forget need’s golden hand. . . .” What began as a fantasy of absolute self-determination quickly becomes a more modest and attainable state of simply being “happy.” The extravagant denial of need altogether—the ultimate romantic wish-fulfillment—is replaced by a momentary forgetting of “need’s golden hand.” Although need proves to be irreducible, perhaps we do not always have to be in its thrall. In the next line, happiness yields to a more enduring satisfaction, but the

speaker earns this satisfaction without requiring the “solacing majesty” of angels plunging through space.

The next lines enact a gradual shift from a momentary bliss to one that is more enduring, because it blends and diffuses itself into quotidian experience: “And if there is an hour there is a day, / There is a month, a year” (CP 405). Here Stevens counters the romantic privileging of bliss as a transcendence of the quotidian by reinscribing this very bliss into the quotidian, thereby anticipating his later affirmation in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” that “the theory / Of poetry is the theory of life, / As it is, in the intricate evasions of as” (CP 486).

What seems to be a desperately utopian wish for “a time / In which majesty is a mirror of the self” becomes the basis for a new realism in poetry that might actually be able to produce “fluctuations in reality” itself. The poem’s climactic next line is the speaker’s ultimate affirmation of a post-romantic nobility: “I have not but I am and as I am, I am.” The speaker does not have the “solacing majesty” of the angel but asserts a kind of majesty nonetheless. I doubt we can understand the latter half of this line without reading it against Coleridge’s theory of the imagination (which is never very far from Stevens’ mind). In the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge famously defines the “primary imagination” as “a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” (304). To appreciate how bold a formulation this is, we should recall that this “infinite I AM” refers back to nothing less than God’s assertion to Moses in Exodus 3:14: “I AM THAT I AM.” In a fascinating footnote to the *Biographia*, Coleridge comments on the King James version of God’s assertion:

I cannot but express my regret, that in the equivocal use of the word *that*, for *in that*, or *because*, our admirable version has rendered the passage susceptible of a degraded interpretation in the mind of common readers or hearers, as if it were a mere reproof to an impertinent question, I am what I am, which might be equally affirmed of himself by any existent being. (275)

In “Notes,” God’s “I am that I am” becomes “as I am, I am”—the word “as” being as intricately evasive as the word “that,” which Coleridge disparages as “equivocal.” Stevens realizes that Coleridge’s unequivocal wish to appropriate for the human imagination God’s capacity for radical self-determination is an untenable wish fulfillment. Stevens’ brilliant strategy is to make equivocality itself a positive power through the use of “as.” With the intricate evasions of “as,” the speaker might be able to preserve the nobility of Coleridgean imagination without committing himself to extravagant ontological claims about human agency.

Part of what the speaker’s “as” seems to be evading, then, is the danger of collapsing into a straightforward “because,” which would bind him to a problematic romantic metaphysics of the imagination. Stevens refuses

to make the romantic mistake of simply equating the poet with God. The “as” proves to be so supple—and so supply evasive—that majesty might literally become “a mirror of the self.” In the affirmation, “as I am, I am,” what seems tautology becomes a powerful affirmation of post-romantic nobility: the “as” functions as a kind of mirror in which the self, modestly asserted in the first “I am,” is reflected into the majestic affirmation of something approaching Coleridge’s “infinite I AM.” But in “Notes,” the infinity of “I am” is rigorously secular because it is specular: it remains grounded in the infinitely reflecting mirror of the intricately evasive “as.”

The last stanza of canto eight insists that a truly modern nobility must evade not only the pressure of romanticism but also the pressure of reality: “These external regions, what do we fill them with / Except reflections, the escapades of death, / Cinderella fulfilling herself beneath the roof?” In the “Noble Rider” essay, Stevens defines “the pressure of reality” as “life in a state of violence, not physically violent, as yet, for us in America, but physically violent for millions of our friends and for still more millions of our enemies” (NA 26–27). He then immediately adds: “A possible poet must be a poet capable of resisting or evading the pressure of the reality of this last degree” (NA 27). These “external regions” are, at one level, the actual geographical regions external to the poet’s imaginings: namely, the deathly “escapades” of World War II. But, at another level, the angel himself, celebrated in the first half of the canto, turns out to be a mere insubstantial “reflection” relegated to the “external regions” of romantic make-believe. In the canto’s last line, the sublime angel “plucking his strings” takes on a decidedly different meaning as he is pathetically reduced to a self-absorbed fairy-tale character: “Cinderella fulfilling herself beneath the roof.” Perhaps the most fundamental problem with romanticism, the speaker suggests, is that it so privileges the poet that it threatens to collapse into a solipsistic exercise in self-aggrandizement.⁴ In the “Noble Rider” essay, Stevens emphatically distances himself from this romantic view:

What is [the poet’s] function? Certainly it is not to lead people out of the confusion in which they find themselves. . . . I think that his function is to make his imagination theirs and that he fulfills himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others. His role, in short, is to help people to live their lives. (NA 29)

Crucially, the poet must “make his imagination theirs.” In stark contrast to a romantic Cinderella “fulfilling herself,” the Stevensian poet “fulfills himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others.” The poet’s hour of expressible bliss must be publicly shareable.

Stevens, however, makes equally clear that the poet does not help people to live their lives through direct social or political intervention: “I might

be expected to speak of the social, that is to say sociological or political, obligation of the poet. He has none" (*NA* 27).⁵ We may wonder, then, precisely how the post-romantic "majesty" developed in canto eight of "Notes" can help us to live our lives. The poem's last lines evoke the majesty of being "flicked by feeling" but fail to elaborate how the "fluent mundo" of poetry might be able to engage the world outside of poetry:

We shall return at twilight from the lecture
Pleased that the irrational is rational,

Until flicked by feeling, in a gilded street,
I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo.
You will have stopped revolving except in crystal.
(*CP* 406–07)

The end of the "Noble Rider" essay grasps at metaphor after metaphor in a desperate attempt to elaborate the possible social role of this flick's nobility. Stevens first defines nobility as a "force," just as "a wave is a force and not the water of which it is composed" (*NA* 35). Shortly thereafter, he struggles to capture the social force of this nobility: nobility "is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality" (*NA* 36). Eloquence, unfortunately, cannot cover over the essential vagueness of calling nobility "a violence from within" or the imagination "pressing back against" the pressure of reality. We need to turn to the end of his poem "Prologues to What Is Possible," published years after "Notes," to establish more concretely the social force of this poetic flick:

What self, for example, did he contain that had not yet been
loosed,
Snarling in him for discovery as his attentions spread,
As if all his hereditary lights were suddenly increased
By an access of color, a new and unobserved, slight dithering,
The smallest lamp, which added its puissant flick, to which
he gave
A name and privilege over the ordinary of his commonplace—

A flick which added to what was real and its vocabulary,
The way some first thing coming into Northern trees
Adds to them the whole vocabulary of the South,
The way the earliest single light in the evening sky, in spring,
Creates a fresh universe out of nothingness by adding itself,
The way a look or a touch reveals its unexpected magnitudes.
(*CP* 516–17)

Where “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” can offer only negative characterizations of the role of nobility in society (“protecting us from a violence without” and “pressing back against” the pressure of reality), this poem suggests that nobility’s very negativity can take on positive force by adding to what is real and its vocabulary—that is, by expanding our affective grammar for responding and adapting to the various pressures of reality. Perhaps the supreme fiction of “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” is that the poem itself can be more than a mere “prologue” to what poetry makes possible by providing direct testimony of how a simple “flick” can create “a fresh universe out of nothingness.” An intricate evasion might then prove to be the only plausible form that nobility can take.

University of California, Berkeley

Notes

¹ This is the move in the poem that many recent critics seem to miss. Joseph Riddel’s “Metaphoric Staging,” a deconstructive reading of “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” is a case in point. I concur with Charles Altieri’s assessment that “Riddel’s Deconstructionist Stevens, who seeks ‘a writing that kills’ by constantly disclosing the artifice in our fictions, never ceases from decreation long enough to adopt a stance one can demystify or, one must add, that society can care about as a fiction” (“Why Stevens Must Be Abstract” 116 n). I want, finally, to acknowledge a large debt to Altieri’s *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry*, which develops a complex argument for the fundamentally testimonial nature of modernist poetry. My reading of “Notes” as gesturing toward—and enacting—a poetics of nobility is an application of Altieri’s general claim about the role of testimony in modernist aesthetics.

² This word is misprinted in *Collected Poems* as “violent.”

³ Perhaps “sublation,” in the Hegelian sense, is a more accurate characterization of the speaker’s engagement with romanticism than “overcoming.” For Hegelian sublation contains the senses of both preservation *and* cancellation: the speaker does not leave romanticism behind in canto eight so much as he swallows romanticism whole and moves beyond it at a stroke. The tripartite structure of “Notes,” one should also note, enacts this movement of sublation: pleasure is earned dialectically from abstraction and change. The conception of poetry as an “elixir, an excitation, a pure power” (CP 382) is not to be confused with the “pure, gorgeous nonsense” (NA 3) that Stevens speaks of in relation to Plato’s *Phaedrus*.

⁴ Bloom and Kermodé simply miss the speaker’s ironic stance toward the romantic privileging of the poet’s psyche. Bloom, for example, argues for the reader’s “satisfaction of knowing that the wings and the stone-haunted air, the place not the angel’s own, are both evidences of . . . the power of the poet’s mind over the possibilities of things” (213; emphasis added). Kermodé asks, in his discussion of this canto, “if the poet creates an angel (and he has just done so) is not his joy equal to the angel’s?” (118). Bloom and Kermodé do not allow the reader to share in the poet’s ecstatic experience. Against these critics, Jonathan Ausubel, in a recent essay on “Notes,” suggests: “Each of us, the self of *Notes* asserts, can be an angel. . . . [E]ach reader is implicated, each reader reads ‘I’ and speaks about herself” (370). Unfortunately, Ausubel’s reading stops short of elaborating how such an identification with the angel is ironized in the latter half of canto eight.

⁵ Marjorie Perloff seems precisely to miss this point. Her “political” reading of the Major Man cantos of “Notes” as coded fascist ideology fails to account for the level of abstraction at which the poem operates (see esp. Perloff 59 ff.).

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The Lyric Element and the Prosaic World in "The Idea of Order at Key West"

VICTORIA SHINBROT

*I am the truth, since I am part of what is real, but
neither more nor less than those around me. And I am
imagination, in a leaden time and in a world that does
not move for the weight of its own heaviness.*

—"The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet"

IN ANSWER TO THE question—How does one create in the face of a seemingly imposing order and absolute stasis?—Wallace Stevens suggests that one resists by denying that there is any definitive order apart from the temporal order and beauty continually created and decreed in the imagination. Rather than the fluvial metaphor of William James's "stream of consciousness," which lends itself perfectly to the narrative flow of the modernist novel, Stevens the poet turns to evocations of the sea to define the fluid, unstable, threatening, and liberating nature of life and the lyric genre. Like the waves, which lend their name to Virginia Woolf's famous lyrical novel, reality as constituted in Stevens' "The Idea of Order at Key West" is a continuous process, constantly moving its elements and shifting its shape without flowing in a predetermined direction. It is not only the fluid and free-flowing qualities of water, however, that lend themselves to an analogy with lyricism. The sea can both connect the self with the world and isolate the self from it, just as the inherent subjectivity of lyricism (most notably examined by Mikhail Bakhtin) can be both restrictive and liberating.

To this extent Stevens possesses a remarkable ability to reformulate the traditional boundaries of the lyrical voice. Stevens' "The Idea of Order at Key West" retunes and experiments with the lyric's various modalities and re-characterizes solitude as a potentially self-transforming rather than self-limiting experience. Subjectivity is not conceived, as it is in the traditional lyrical poem, as a fixed constant but rather as something that is temporally bound and co-created in the poem's constant exchanges of meaning and identity. Verbal strategies such as apostrophe are included in this extended lyric as a way for the poet to hover both within and beyond the confines of the poem's lyrical self-unfolding, so that it not only

addresses an unknown interlocutor but also speaks and reflects critically upon the poem being created. Stevens is concerned as much with maintaining a skeptical or critical attitude toward the poet's role as he is with undoing univocal ideological positions that hinder the artist's freedom, at least provisionally, to order reality.

Stevens problematizes and works around some of the limitations associated with lyric poetry. Although "The Idea of Order at Key West" does not present us with the kind of dialogism Bakhtin models in the novel, Stevens offers alternatives to Bakhtin's well-known dismissal of lyric poetry's restrictive, univocal hermeticism. "The Idea of Order at Key West," in particular, expands the dimensions of the lyric voice in a manner that ironically corresponds in key junctures to Bakhtin's celebration of the prosaic and his opposition to the absolute order of literary—or political—systems. In "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin writes:

Everything that the poet sees, understands and thinks, he does through the eyes of a given language, in its inner forms, and there is nothing that might require, for its expression, the help of any other or alien language. The language of the poetic genre is a unitary and singular Ptolemaic world outside of which nothing else exists and nothing else is needed. The concept of many worlds of language, all equal in their ability to conceptualize and to be expressive, is organically denied to poetic style. (286)

Bakhtin's insistence on the unitary, hermetic quality of poetic language is countered in Stevens' "The Idea of Order at Key West" by the poet's encounters with an inimical language that turns him into a listener aware of the limits of his own speech. A raised and slightly ironic level of self-consciousness is the key mediating factor in Stevens' poem. The poet does not merely present a lyrical utterance that emanates from within a highly subjective or personal realm. Rather, the poet's experience as creator or singer is compared to his experience as listener. The lyric voice of the poem never functions as the centralizing force of the poem because in an ironic mode the poet balances between his roles as listener and singer, commenting upon that which he is creating by comparing it to an inscrutable or ineluctable song, such as that of the sea, which does not abide by the human or literary conventions of self/other or past/present. The poet cannot use his voice to articulate the inhuman sounds of sea and singer, but he can beckon the audience to enlist their imaginations in the poetic process to stop, listen, and formulate their own responses to the songs.

Like many of the conversational poems of the romantic period made famous by Wordsworth and Coleridge, "The Idea of Order at Key West" is simultaneously private and communal. It addresses an external presence or consciousness that exists outside the isolated sphere of the poet's own

subjectivity in order to share as well as to confirm the reality of the seemingly "fictive" experience. "Through this other half," Tilottama Rajan, writing of Coleridge's "The Lime-Tree Bower, My Prison," explains, "[such poems] claim to emerge from the limiting enclosure of reverie into the open space of the real, to make of the poet a man speaking to men rather than a dreamer who projects the form of his desire onto a blind world" (222). The interlocutor is drawn into the experience of listening to the ineluctable sounds and therefore does not mediate between the real and fictive for the poet so much as enable the poet to reassess the boundaries between self and world, self and other. The addressee prevents, in other words, the poet's voice from turning into an empty echo.

When in the third stanza of "The Idea of Order at Key West" the speaker asks, "Whose spirit is this? we said, because we knew / It was the spirit we sought and knew / That we should ask this often as she sang" (*CP* 105), Stevens creates a correspondence between the speaker and the external audience, one derived from a mutual longing to know or grasp a "spirit" that eludes possession. "The reader," as Angus Cleghorn notes, "becomes involved in configuring the poem's compositional world rather than being told about it." He further explains, "The lack of reference for the spirit and the ocean is the mystery the poet wants to participate in. Although a defined knowledge is well out of reach, there exist between the utterance and knowledge the quest and the song" (26). Resisting the tendency to harmonize mind and external reality draws attention to the poem itself and, more specifically, to the very process of creating and decreasing order, art, the world that we the readers, like the speaker and the singer, are engaged in during various temporal phases of the poem.

The lyrical enterprise comes to represent only a temporal resistance against erosion, especially for a poet such as Stevens who "sees his own consciousness as simultaneously limited and involved in a process of growth or becoming" (24), to borrow Anne Mellor's description of the romantic ironist. Through their ongoing interactions with their addressee, the speakers become more consciously aware and involved in the process of creating and decreasing the poetic and prosaic world they inhabit. "For what the woman sees and hears at the beach is not what she sings," notes Albert Gelpi, "and the speaker experiences her song as the third term that in some sense mediates between mind and nature not by denying nature's 'meaningless' violence but by turning sound and noise into voice and word" (158). The lyrical utterance is not about an isolated expression of a single consciousness cut off from the world but rather about an intersection or meeting of the speaker's consciousness with a halted, yet paradoxically ongoing interaction with an unmediated reality (the sea) and the imagination (the singer's song) that remains unreconciled by the poem's actual singer.

Ironically, poetic communication with an interlocutor establishes an entry into the very prosaic realm Bakhtin thinks it prohibits. In her essay

"The Forms of the Ordinary: Bakhtin, Prosaics and the Lyric," Clare Cavanagh takes issue with Bakhtin's "priestly" view of romantic poets and their poetry by highlighting what she sees as the "'prosaic' strain of romantic and post-romantic poetry" (44):

Lyrics embody neither chaos, nor order, but precisely what Bakhtin calls "the form-shaping force" that catalyzes creativity both in daily life and in art, and that coincides with the "craving for the creation of form" that Mandelstam sees as the impulse generating all poetry. Lyrics take their shape, that is to say, not from some fixed and finished repertoire of fossilized poetic forms, but from the same inclusive impulse to create order that informs our continuing quest for the ordinary in everyday life. . . . "The contingencies of history and the messiness of daily life" are not "thought away," as Bakhtin would have it, by the rigorous, rarefied demands of poetic style and meter. Rather, the poet thinks through life's contingencies by way of poetic forms; and he thinks about the forms themselves in the process of constructing them. They become analogues for the "ordinary" constructs we use to guide us through the mess of daily life. (42)

Cavanagh's comments clearly show that poetry is not a unique or elevated activity distinct from the quotidian world, but rather an activity integrally involved in the way we shape and form our daily lives. Stevens' oeuvre represents a curious mixture of the romantic and the modern in this respect and thus sheds new light on Marjorie Perloff's characterization of Stevens as a "Last Romantic" (506), who stands in an Anglo-American tradition that "takes the lyric paradigm for granted" (504). My reading of "The Idea of Order at Key West," however, suggests that Stevens is less an anachronistic adherent to romantic formal conventions than one who blends, rather fascinatingly, elements of the romantic and the modernist interpretations of life. He sustains a preoccupation with a romantic belief in the primacy of the imagination but he de-emphasizes the transcendent, the metaphysical split between the real and unreal, subject and object. Emphasis is not placed on the imagination as a divine tool for seeing beyond the real into the mystical, as occurs in many romantic contexts; rather Stevens sees the imagination as an integral part of reality. "All of Stevens' career in verse and prose proceeds from the assumption that the imagination has the ennobling and sublime opportunity to counter chaos and make the 'meaningless plungings' 'acutest' in measuring them into song" (158), writes Gelpi. Stevens senses, in other words, the dynamic, processual element of reality, its fundamental createdness in the everyday acts of the imagination. But he also sees that the script is always changing, that one has to be willing to decreate or unwrite one's fictions in order to live in the

moment of possibility and potential meaning-making, a moment that has no privileged origins.

In "The Idea of Order at Key West," the beachcomber and poet remain at the shore, exiled from the sea's inhuman sounds; yet the experience of loss or the inability to recapture fully the sea's essential song is included in their respective songs as they alter and reconfigure their own conceptions of self and world. As Robert Rehder explains, "Her voice and the voices of her surroundings intermingle and separate in a process that changes the world for the poet. . . . Despite their coexistence, the poet concludes that song and sea are essentially independent" (143). The poet watches from a safe distance and realizes that he too is implicated in the performance he witnesses, for there is no mirror held up to reflect nature, only the dynamic activity of making the moment real for the singer in her solitude and for him in his expanded consciousness of the self as "lingering music" (Rehder 144) or creative act. "Bakhtin insists throughout his work on the value of outsidedness; in Bakhtinian thought 'only a genuine other consciousness can draw convincing boundaries for us' " (54), Cavanagh explains. Yet, the "genuine other consciousness" in Stevens' poem shows us just how fluid and permeable those boundaries between self and world are.

What signifies to some critics the quintessentially modernist element in Stevens' work appears to others as an extension of the romantic lyrical persona or voice. Perloff contends, "In keeping with the romantic model, the 'I' of Stevens is a Solitary Singer; his voice, even at its most whimsical or ironic, is never less than serious about the truths for which it searches; the tone is meditative and subdued; the addressee is always the poet himself" (505). Perloff suggests that the alleged self-referentiality of Stevens' poetry entails a detachment from reality as well as a privileging of "thought" over "form." In this reading, the "sea" in Stevens' poem would be a purely metaphorical image, just as the "Key West" of its title is a "symbolic embodiment[] of the poet's creation" (504), rather than a reflection of the concrete realities of a Floridian sea resort, one that could be found on any map.

Although the metaphorical function of the sea in this poem in particular would be difficult if not impossible to refute, this is not to say that this is its sole function or that "form" here, as it is constituted by the ineluctable sounds of sea or the song of the singer, does not also shape and point to a world outside the poem. Perloff seems to reiterate Bakhtin's assumptions about the mutual exclusivity of lyrical and communal voices. Rather, Stevens' use of the romantic form implies an understanding of modernism that builds on elements of tradition to create a bridge between solitary speaker and the reality around him in both space and time. The sea expresses Stevens' idea that even a solitary voice cannot be separated from how it is substantiated by something outside itself, whether the sea, the singer, the interlocutor, or the reader. This suggests that the use of roman-

tic form should not disqualify Stevens from being among the first modernists, as Perloff's influential article implies. Rather, we need to look at the specific ways artists such as Stevens use romantic form to break out of the perceived confines of both a solipsistic romanticism and a radically fragmented, shapeless modernism.

The singer in Stevens' poem does not express subjectivity through nature or poetic fallacy. "She sang beyond the genius of the sea. / The water never formed to mind or voice. . . ." Nor is the subject asserted in terms of subject-object relations. "The sea was not a mask. / No more was she." Rather the subject exists in a moment of creation through time. Everything that is created is at the next moment something else. "It may be that in all her phrases stirred / The grinding water and the gasping wind; / But it was she and not the sea we heard" (CP 128–29). Stevens turns the poem he is creating into a self-conscious reflection on the poetic act of recuperation itself.

This is why in Stevens' poem there is also an almost indefinable sense of a lingering farewell or melancholia. Stevens has, to a certain degree, already denied the possibility of recovering the beachcomber's song because he realizes that reality is something that is created rather than something that is found. This implies a "return to the Aristotelian definition of *poiesis* as *mimesis praxeos*, the imitation of an action," a quality Perloff suggests critics have typically ascribed to the modernism of Pound, while reserving to Stevens the "articulation of complex and ambiguous meanings" (506, 505). However, the "imitation of an action" in Stevens' poem does not imply the mere recreation of the singer or sea's song but rather the continuous progressive—or "syntactic"—replacement of one song with another. In all too clear and unambiguous terms, the poem is about the creation of self through the temporal and fluid element of song.

In "The Idea of Order at Key West," the moment of becoming is most acute at its passing; the singer's song has already flowed into something else just as the voices or songs in Stevens' poem dissolve into "ghostlier demarcations" (CP 130) before Stevens can give voice to a synthesis. Moreover, Brooke Baeten's contention that "Stevens discards [the] muse and asserts that he is the only voice of his poetry, the only source of his creation" and that he "emphasizes the virility and the ultimate authority of the masculine voice of the poet" (29) is countered by the very poem the speaker produces. If his poem is an attempt on some level to mirror the world in constant flux, then the need to transcend or recuperate the song has already been dissolved in the decreative and creative process of the poem. The sea affirms the speaker's intuition of an infinite and ineluctable presence while also negating the possibility of transcending the immediate realm of the imagination. For Stevens the observer, the possibility of reifying a moment of creation—something that is by its very nature in a perpetual state of flux or becoming—is impossible. "It is true that Stevens introduces all sorts of voices and eventually seems to undercut and dis-

card them all. However, this undercutting," Keith Booker contends, "does not entail an attempt to exterminate polyphony. Instead, it demonstrates a refusal to privilege any one language or style above all others" (80). Thus the poem consistently subverts the construction of voice as something isolated or cut off from other voices equally caught up in the contingencies of a fluid and impermanent reality.

The world also moves away from a centered vision of truth and beauty toward the idea of a reality that consists of relations that are impossible to represent or fix statically. This idea is indirectly expressed by the numerous conditional phrases: "If it was only the dark voice of the sea"; "If it was only the outer voice of sky"; if the song was a mere echo of the environment, "However clear, it would have been deep air, / The heaving speech of air, a summer sound / Repeated in a summer without end / And sound alone" (CP 129). Pure sound unfiltered by the imagination is endless because it exists beyond the limit of the mind's finite temporal realm, beyond time, space, and causality. "[B]ut even after all these terms are sorted out the question still remains: 'Whose spirit is this?' " (158), James Longenbach asks. "In 'The Idea of Order' there is no certain answer . . . because a certain answer does not exist: the poem asks us to understand a world in which ideas of order are necessarily provisional and continuously changing. The poem enacts that ambiguity on a syntactical level, throwing its own answers into question" (158–59). The poet chooses not to see himself clearly reflected in the comprehensive realm of reason and representation. Yet by throwing his own answers into questions, Stevens expands knowledge of himself and of the world. For a poet such as Stevens, incomprehensibility is an essential part of creative productivity because it compels him to generate a comprehensible, yet always provisional, world out of himself.

Because the world cannot be assigned an inherent value or sense, because it is awash on all sides, always in motion, always changing, meaning and power are and must be continually relocated. This results in the denial of an implicit order and the assertion of the freedom and necessity of the creative act of the imagination. Here again one finds a parallel between the aesthetics of the poem and Bakhtin's prosaics. Gary Morson and Caryl Emerson describe Bakhtin's aesthetic and ethical position in the following way:

[W]holeness is always a matter of work; it is not a gift, but a project. When Bakhtin writes that unity is always "posited," the word he chooses is *zadan*; he seems to be playing on closely related words, *zadacha*, a problem, and *zadanie*, a task. Thus wholeness is never a given, it is always a task. Disorder, by contrast, is often (though not always) a given. . . . In the self, in culture, and in language, it is not (as Freud would have us believe) disorder or fragmentation that requires explanation: it is integrity. The creation of an integral self is the work of a life-

time, and although that work can never be completed, it is nonetheless an ethical responsibility. Here, we perceive the connection between Bakhtin's prosaics and his ethics, which demands that we create integrity so as to *take* responsibility. (30–31)

Both writers suggest that being in the world is not discovering a world but creating one. However, they are not about escaping from reality into fiction (having what Bakhtin called "an alibi for being" [qtd. in Morson and Emerson 31]), but rather about the possibility of redrawing the boundaries separating the real from the created. This radical negation of mimesis results in the assertion of freedom and responsibility. In Stevens' poem, the sea is like the world, something not formed into fixed concepts; it is fluid. Every creation is a vanishing point just as every epistemology can never capture a fixed truth. The world is a song because it is created; it exists in a linguistic moment of creation, and the self is a part of it and not a subject that stands outside of it, as is perhaps the case in Wordsworth's "The Solitary Reaper." In essence, Stevens as speaker in the poem remains on the shore or margins of the inimitable freedom represented by the fluid natural realm while he too is implicated in the eternal flux of creating and decreasing the world he inhabits. "Art and life," Bakhtin contends, "are not one, but they must become united in me, in the unity of my responsibility" (qtd. in Morson and Emerson 72). Neither the artist nor the work of art transcends morality or ethics. Rather, an ethical system is created from the artist's willingness to see the interdependency of art and life and to accept responsibility for his creative acts and the impact they have on the ongoing process of constructing a meaningful world. "In one of his characteristic personifications," Morson and Emerson write, "Bakhtin whimsically speaks for life: 'So where's our place in all this?' life says; *that* is art, and all we have is the prose of everyday life" (72). For Stevens, and perhaps for Bakhtin as well, life and art are two words for the same process.

On the dust jacket of the 1936 edition of *Ideas of Order* Stevens wrote, "We think of changes occurring today as economic changes, involving political and social changes. Such changes raise questions of political and social order. While it is inevitable that a poet should be concerned with such questions, this book, although it reflects them, is primarily concerned with ideas of order of a different nature. . . . The book is essentially a book of pure poetry. I believe that, in any society, the poet should be the exponent of the imagination of that society" (OP 222–23). This attitude of Stevens may become clearer when it is read face-to-face with his statement in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words": "The subject-matter of poetry is not that 'collection of solid, static objects extended in space' but the life that is lived in the scene that it composes; and so reality is not that external scene but the life that is lived in it" (NA 25). Clearly the essence of Stevens' view of poetry is based on the value that is derived from the artfulness of living or the art that is lived in life. Life, for Stevens, consists

of the literal, the disordered, and the creative potential that are raised to a level of provisional order, beauty, and abstraction through art. In short, Stevens, who was often accused of being too abstract, of living in his head, could not have composed poetry were it not for his acute sense of the real or of life as a dynamically shifting scene.

Critics have pointed out the significance of Stevens' ideas of order in "The Idea of Order at Key West," not only for the self but also for the creation of community. In an anthropological interpretation of the relationship between community and the individual in the poem, Thomas Bertonneau traces the problem of representation thematized in the poem back to the practices of ritual and human sacrifice, which place the victim paradoxically both in the center and outside of the community. Figure or lyrical representation as sacrifice serves as a type of "displacement into imagination" (65), Bertonneau argues. The "order" established by lyrical world-making thus comes at a literal, human cost in the poem. Bertonneau places his interpretation in the context of Stevens' aspirations during the 1930s "to think of his art in a way that made it less disconnected from life" (54). Bertonneau's fascinating reading of the poem points to an ethical direction not far removed from the one being asserted here. However, whereas Bertonneau might see the means by which community is brought together and ethical and moral responsibility for one's fellow man as being constituted in the single sacrifice or figuration of the singer, I see the ethical voice of the poem being generated in the act of creation itself and in the repeated negation and transformation of the song, which implicates singer, speaker, and reader in a shared moral imperative to resist such claims to permanence or figuration.

In "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" for example, Stevens discusses what he calls the "pressure of reality." "I am thinking of life in a state of violence, not physically violent, as yet, for us in America, but physically violent for millions of our friends and for still more millions of our enemies and spiritually violent, it may be said, for everyone alive. A possible poet must be a poet capable of resisting or evading the pressure of the reality of this last degree, with the knowledge that the degree of today may become a deadlier degree tomorrow" (NA 26–27). Stevens maintains that the poet should avoid ascribing to a particular ideology, no matter how great the pressure of reality. Once the poet abandons a comprehensive view of humanity and forfeits artistic ambivalence, then his or her aesthetic and in some cases even personal freedom are also forfeited. As Joseph Riddel points out, "The poems of *Ideas of Order* are anxious to communicate. Thus their capitulation to the age—but if the age demands dictum, it will be the dictum of poetry that Stevens offers. The realities of ideologies, unlike those of Florida, are not to be indulged and enjoyed; they are militant, coercive, and bring death to the spirit if not the body" (120). The ills of modernity are grounded in ideas of absolutist rather than provisional order, an order imposed by an unchanging law either of na-

ture or history or both, instead of an order based on the fulfillment of life's chaotic potential set free by the freedom inherent in the artistic creation of the world. Stevens reacts to this situation by suggesting that the artist must maintain aesthetic mobility and flexibility by evading and resisting reductive aesthetic classifications and rigid ideological doctrine. Accordingly, Booker suggests, "Stevens' injunction to resist the pressure of reality does not imply that the poet should remain separate from the concerns of the real world, but simply that he should remain as much as possible an independent and oppositional voice, not allowing himself to be co-opted (or 'obligated') by any one viewpoint or language, and especially not by the prevailing authoritarian views of the society around him." Stevens' poetry accommodates this stance, Booker notes, because it "does consistently deny that there can ever be a single privileged voice to which all other voices must pay obeisance" (74, 75).

In her essay "Prosaics and the Problem of Form," Caryl Emerson discusses the underlying antagonism to formalism and totalitarianism in Bakhtin's theory of prosaics.

We also defended prosaics as a moral philosophy, a view of the world that sees variety, interruption, modest privatizing values, and the particularized relations between *differentiated* parts as more fundamental to human experience—and to human freedom—than the formal relations that obtain in categorical imperatives, dialectics, abstract systems, grand syntheses, or heroic Five-Year Plans. A prosaic world need not be careless or anarchic. Patches of order do exist in it. But these patches are not pre-formed or "discovered"; they are at best holding patterns, the result of continual compromise and negotiation among competing voices. Prosaic order—or prosaic harmony—is accretive and temporary. (17–18)

Bakhtin's comments prefigure the moment in modernism, or, more to the point, the moment in Stevens' poem, where the possibility of order, sense, or meaning is affirmed but not made absolute. As in Bakhtin's prosaic world, "patches of order" do exist in it. But, just as in Bakhtin, order, reason, reality itself no longer have privileged origins in Stevens' fragmentary modernist world; they are half-created by the imagination and moderated by a self-conscious awareness of human limitation and the ineluctable song of the sea. When Stevens ponders the "maker's rage to order words of the sea," he also acknowledges that the human need to make order out of chaos is something that cannot be evaded. However, for Stevens, order, whether aesthetic or political, is little more than a threshold between reality and the imagination; a "fragrant portal[], dimly-starred," a reminder of the uncertainty "of ourselves and of our origins" and of the ineffable chaos that eludes reason and mediates our existence "In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds" (CP 130).

Stevens continues to question the efficacy of the distinctions between inner and outer, the real and imaginary, as he calls out to Ramon Fernandez. The “glassy lights, / The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there” that “Mastered the night and portioned out the sea” (CP 130), are reminders of the human need to create order out of chaos. They also raise awareness of the poet’s or “maker’s rage to order words of the sea” in a way that self-consciously causes the poet to detach or undo the intention to fix or capture the words of the poem he is creating in a stationary context. Like the lights in the fishing boats tilting in the air, poetry portions out the world but it can never capture reality, which is always in flux. Poetry helps us to make it through the night and to provide a sense of order in the darkness. The shimmering lights are also reminders of the provisional and ever changing medium of the free element—the imagination, which always and inevitably anchors us to reality. It is a “Blessed rage” (CP 130) because we cannot live without it. As Stevens himself once noted, “There is, in fact, a world of poetry indistinguishable from the world in which we live, or, I ought to say, no doubt, from the world in which we shall come to live, since what makes the poet the potent figure that he is, or was, or ought to be, is that he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it” (NA 31).

In “The Idea of Order at Key West,” the rage for order is positive when viewed as poetic and provisional, but when seen as absolute knowledge, it is just as aggressive as Bakhtin’s totalizing monologism, whether in a political or poetic context. Likewise, the solitude of the singer and speaker in the poem is not mitigated by a purely dialogical interaction, but neither is it reified into the poem itself or into the speaker’s voice alone. Rather, both singer and speaker are transformed by the very songs they sing, which permeate for brief moments the fluid boundaries of self and other, reality and the imagination, to create monuments to beauty and impermanence before they too are swept away.

California State University, Sacramento

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Anding and Ending: Metaphor and Closure in Stevens' "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven"

KAREN HELGESON

I

ALTHOUGH CRITICS HAVE expressed a wide variety of opinions regarding the central issues raised in the poetry and prose of Wallace Stevens, they are virtually unanimous when it comes to the subject of closure: Stevens does not believe in it; his work does not endorse closure and definitely does not exhibit it. Observations such as the following, which asserts, in effect, that Stevens explicitly disavows the viability of closure, are legion in the critical canon:

There is in Stevens, however, the persistent sense, as in much modern poetry, that language is ultimately inadequate to accomplish any final resolution or establish a final order of reality. The speaker of "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" is content with "being there together," short of having achieved a total unity, or sense of unity, implying that language . . . does not eliminate the self's sense of separation and does not achieve or create an actual, final, experienced unity. (Wilde 19–20)

Writing of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," Steven Shaviro puts the case about as baldly as possible: "The poem enacts a relation with an outside," he writes, "neither from the point of view of a central and self-enclosed subject nor as the bridging or closing of a subject-object gap, but as the denial of any possibility of closure" (224). Stevens' critics have found "An Ordinary Evening" an especially convincing illustration of what they consider his anti-closural bias. Among the passages alleged to advance such arguments, the most frequently cited, perhaps, is that containing the series of "and yet's" in the poem's first stanza:

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

Thomas A. Fink, for example, writes, "The three 'and yet's' represent a 'never-ending' procession of qualifications" (88). The resulting "swarm of conflicting realities," he contends, "breaks open any stiff conceptual or linguistic container, and the free play of differences prevails" (90). Thus Fink maintains, "Language does exactly the opposite of what the speaker wants it to do: . . . it multiplies and scatters (often conflicting) perspectives on the subject" (90). A common variant on this interpretation holds that the "and yet" series signifies the succession of world views that have emerged, gained ascendancy, and then declined throughout human history. Religions, nations, cultures typically insist that theirs is the last word, the final "and yet." But, the familiar argument continues, the passage of time exposes all such systems as specious. Their conflicting claims prove not only that there is no last word but also that there is no word at all; that is, no set of conventions is capable of negotiating meaningful human exchange.

"An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," however, simply does not support such views. Stevens considered closure a viable and desirable quality in poems and in life generally, and he makes the nature and experience of closure a central theme in "An Ordinary Evening." Although mistaken in claiming that the poem lacks closure, the critics cited above define the term well. Closure, as Dana Wilde writes, entails some kind of "final resolution," a "final order of reality," accompanied by a "sense of unity" with that order. As such, closure would enable or, more accurately, be synonymous with the heightened kind of communication that Shaviro calls "the bridging or closing of a subject-object gap."¹

With these provisional criteria in mind, it is possible to return to canto I and see in it the beginnings of a much different poem from that assumed in currently popular readings:

These houses, these difficult objects, dilapidate
Appearances of what appearances,
Words, lines, not meanings, not communications,

Dark things without a double, after all,
Unless a second giant kills the first—
A recent imagining of reality,

.
A larger poem for a larger audience. . . . (CP 465)

The speaker's perception that "communications" have lapsed and his implicit resolve to restore them are what sets "An Ordinary Evening" in motion. Canto I also suggests how this restoration might be accomplished, namely, in the creation of what Stevens calls a "recent imagining of reality" or "larger poem." A larger poem, which in this context signifies not so much actual poems as it does the world views poems help constitute, subsumes and revitalizes systems of thought and belief that have come to

distance rather than connect us with our worlds. The remainder of "An Ordinary Evening" can best be read, I think, as a depiction of how such connection is achieved and as a validation of the prior assumption that communication is indeed possible.

Evidence in support of such a reading is first intimated in the same "and yet, and yet, and yet—" series so frequently invoked in relativistic or deconstructive readings such as those cited above. When the conspicuous repetition of "and" prompts us to think twice about this most transparent of words, we are reminded that its etymology is inextricably involved with that of "end," for "and" derives ultimately from a Sanskrit word meaning "end" or "boundary." On the one hand, Stevens' word play could be read as ratification of the seemingly self-evident premise that we cannot experience a new "and" without in some way ending our engagement with a previous one. But the passage also supports a more radical and apparently contradictory conclusion, one that is inchoate in canto I but made quite explicit in canto VI: "Alpha continues to begin. / Omega is refreshed at every end" (CP 469). Under certain circumstances, endings and endings—without losing their conjunctive or terminating properties—can obtain simultaneously. A large part of my effort in this essay will be to show how "anded" perspectives, rather than canceling each other out, can relate to one another in ways that reveal an "end" that completes and connects them all, the kind of end known as closure.

One cause of the widespread animus against closure, no doubt, has been the ways anti-closuralists have defined it. Consider, for example, this observation from James Longenbach's *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things*:

While in . . . "Final Soliloquy" Stevens tried to insist again that "We feel the obscurity of an order, a whole," he rejects any such wholeness in "The Course of a Particular"—especially a wholeness manufactured by poetry; he refuses to gloss over the "conflict" and the "resistance" involved in "say[ing] that one is part of everything." (298)

The assumption that closure can obtain only if conflict and difference are ignored equates it with a facile "happily ever after" finality that Stevens repeatedly dismissed as neither possible nor desirable ("Is there no change of death in paradise? / Does ripe fruit never fall?" [CP 69]). But to reject heaven is not to reject the haven of closure. Stevens' mature conception of closure is anticipated in passages such as the following from "The Man with the Blue Guitar," where he speculates that certain poems might exist "beyond the compass of change, / . . . in a final atmosphere; / For a moment final" (CP 168). For Stevens, closure entails a *momentary* finality, what in canto X of "An Ordinary Evening" he calls "a permanence composed of impermanence" (CP 472). Far from being a delusional contrivance "manufactured by poetry," closure in Stevens' view is naturally achievable both

in poetry and in experience generally. What is more, as "An Ordinary Evening" makes abundantly clear, closure does not require the avoidance of change, difference, and conflict; it can, in fact, be achieved only by acknowledging and embracing them. To substantiate these claims, claims that run so counter to the prevailing wisdom regarding closure, we will need to take a closer look at what is meant by "anding/ending."

Historically, our way of understanding the relationships designated by the words "and" and "end" has been determined in large part by factors inherent in the ways we perceive and conceive. When we attempt to identify what we see, we are obliged to observe limits: here is where this object ends; there is where its neighbor, which relates to it as an "and," begins. (It is his fascination with such basic acts of demarcation that underlies Stevens' career-long preoccupation with horizons and thresholds of all kinds.) The same logic has governed our experience of time, which we understand to be a succession of "anded" events. As late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century arguments for the relativity of meaning and value gained wider acceptance, however, such distinctions became increasingly regarded as subjective impositions on a world whose continuous modulation defies categorization.

Consistent with such views, the words used to designate these "ands" have typically been relegated to nothing more than arbitrary signs affixed to equally arbitrary extrapolations from the continuum of space and time. In his early work Stevens wrestled repeatedly with the implications of such arguments, which seemed to deny that significant communication is possible and thus to subvert the poetic enterprise itself. In "The Man with the Blue Guitar," for example, he cites the difficulty of identifying "things as they are" (*CP* 174) within the "sea of ex" (*CP* 175), by which he means both the constantly changing "external" world and the multitude of inherited ideas and beliefs that, though "ex," continue to influence the present. Among many possible examples of Stevens' eventual resolution of these issues, "The Motive for Metaphor" presents the neatest illustration:

The motive for metaphor, shrinking from
The weight of primary noon,
The ABC of being,

The ruddy temper, the hammer
Of red and blue, the hard sound—
Steel against intimation—the sharp flash,
The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X. (*CP* 288)

In "The Motive for Metaphor," the effort to forge "The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X" replaces the identification of "things as they are" as the project of poetry. Here the "sea of ex," represented by the inventory of things half dead, incomplete, and unexpressed that comprise the poem's

first three stanzas, is seen not as an obstacle but as a motive and source. Accordingly, this sea is given a different “ex” name, one that reflects its new, more honorific role—the “exhilarations of changes” (CP 288). The “X,” which I take to signify a poem’s meaning, is so named because that meaning exists only in the context of the given poem, which can be paraphrased but not duplicated in other words. It is important to note that the “X” cannot be accessed under the auspices of “primary noon,” which, as is frequently the case with Stevens, signifies an anti-creative cast of mind akin to Wordsworth’s “light of common day.” By assuming a transparent relationship between ourselves and our worlds, this mode, in fact, blinds itself to the potential richness of that relationship. In “The Motive for Metaphor,” such blindness is abetted by another erroneous assumption, which is that the “ABCs” of conventional thought and language are adequate to the task of negotiating meaningful communication. What is required for this task, as is suggested by the poem’s title, is metaphor.

Since “metaphor” can have so many and such different meanings, it would be well to spell out briefly the definition that is assumed in this essay, a definition that also informs both “The Motive for Metaphor” and “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven.” My explanation begins, as is common in such discussions, by comparing metaphoric and literal uses of language. As noted earlier, users of any language observe an implicit compact stipulating what they will recognize as “things” (beings, objects, ideas, events, or states) and what words will be used to denote these things. When we hear or see these words, we are said to understand them if they bring to mind the appropriate referent or, more precisely, the conceptualizations we have learned to associate with that referent. (I am describing common practice here and setting aside for the moment the objections to this practice described above.) Uses of language that observe these conventions are considered normal or literal. But over time the relationships between concept and referent tend to break down. The world changes but our conceptualizations of it do not keep up, or, having become clichéd, cease to negotiate any vital engagement with what is “out there.” With their referents thus skewed, literal uses of language degenerate into “mere” words that, as canto I of “An Ordinary Evening” indicates, fail to generate real communications.

Metaphor, on the other hand, works by juxtaposing a conventional name, and thus the concepts associated with that name, with another, “unconventional” name and its customary associations. Take, for example, Whitman’s line “The grass is the flag of my disposition.” Comparing these two names—what literary debate commonly calls the metaphor’s “vehicles” and what this essay would call its “ands”—generates the metaphor’s “tenor” or “end,” where “end” is understood both as terminus and purpose. As noted above, normal word usage and thought processes employ “and” to indicate conjunction between separate things (beings, events, ideas) whose separateness is enforced by the ending that

must be assumed to make the next “and” possible. In metaphoric structures, on the other hand, the components—again, the “ands”—operate as predicates that are arranged in such a fashion as to create and be the end that is the referent; that is, similarity and difference, anding and ending obtain simultaneously. In the example from Whitman, the end generated by its constituent “ands” is the namer’s (and his or her audience’s) new understanding or experience of the referent of the original name, “the grass.” Metaphors, as Stevens says of poems in canto XII of “An Ordinary Evening,” are not about but of the “res” they create (*CP* 473)—involved, that is, in the being of the phenomena they name.

This account of the workings of metaphor applies to entire poems as well as to single figures. As Stevens puts it in one of his “Adagia”: “Poetry is metaphor” (*OP* 194). For illustration we need only return to “The Motive for Metaphor,” in particular its “vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X.” Just as, in a chord, a dominant note both emerges from and assumes ascendancy over a grouping of notes, so the “dominant X”—the tenor/referent/end of the poem—is the point of resolution for the chord-like, metaphoric changes its constituent vehicles work upon one another. Another term for this dynamically achieved resolution is closure. As with poetic closure, the instances of closure that occur in our extra-literary lives, what this essay calls “existential closure,” are generated in relationships that operate metaphorically. Stevens makes this point explicitly in another of his “Adagia”: “Nothing is itself taken alone. Things are because of interrelations or interactions” (*OP* 189). In passages such as the following from “A Study of Images I,” completed during the period in which he was at work on “An Ordinary Evening,” Stevens dispenses with the “because of.” Things are interactions:

in images we awake,
Within the very object that we seek,

Participants of its being. It is, we are.
He is, we are. (*CP* 463)

To say that one is simultaneously oneself and another being, both an “and” and an “end” vis-à-vis the other, is to say we exist in a process that operates according to the principles of metaphor. To awaken within another being or thing—both to connect and to become self-consciously and joyously alive through that connection—is to experience closure. Closure, as Paul Ricoeur says of “living metaphors,” is “at once meaning and event” (99).

In summary, then, the conception of closure that informs “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” includes a metaphorically generated unity in difference and an attendant sense of personal unity and completion. The temporal equivalent of this completion is a finality that, owing to its dependence on difference, must, paradoxically, be temporary: a “permanence

composed of impermanence." This description applies to both existential and poetic closure, although, as I will try to show, "finality" means something importantly different in the case of the latter.

II

The title "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" is unusual in the degree to which it anticipates and encapsulates major concerns in the poem. Etymologically, "ordinary" is an "ordering" and, as Harold Bloom has pointed out, can mean "fitted together" (306). "Ordinary," in this context, suggests the imagination, which the poem portrays as being in constant conversation with the forces of "evening," forces that effect distinction-leveling, destructive change. As this essay will show, the imagination, working in concert with "reality," occasions experiences that, because they involve a momentary finality, are especially well figured in the words "New Haven." "Haven," as many critics have observed, invites comparison with "heaven," the point—well supported by the primary denotation of "ordinary," "routine," or "common"—being that secular "heavens" are all that we have and that they will suffice. Amplifying on these suggestions, canto I serves as an overture, introducing nearly all of the poem's major themes and providing some idea of how these are to be related.

The "eye's plain version" should not be construed, as Bloom does, for example, as a reference to Stevens' "first idea"—the "object" seen in its essential clarity, free from the encrustations that have accrued over generations of human naming. Identifying such a difficult extrapolation with the "vulgate" would be a considerable stretch. The phrase seems to refer, rather, to a simple, preliminary viewing of what is available to the eye "out there," unavoidably colored by the limiting assumptions and conventions of the observer's time and place but prior to any special scrutiny. However we interpret it, what is most important about the eye's plain version is that it presents us with things that exist apart—apart from one another and from ourselves. Plain physical viewing gives us a small part of a large whole, a part that is itself normally experienced as discrete parts, the things our cultures have taught us to discern in the visual continuum. That these things are apart implies the viewer's alienation as well.

"Apart" can also suggest inclusion ("a part"), however; and this use of the same construction to designate both concepts intimates a notion that becomes increasingly important as "An Ordinary Evening" progresses: that to be a part one must be apart—unity presupposes difference and change. When one is merely apart, the world is experienced as an assemblage of "dark things" with which one has no communication. What is required to overcome this sort of apartness is what canto I calls a "recent imagining of reality," "A larger poem for a larger audience," where "poem," again, refers not only to major poetry but also to the aggregate of creative thought and work that informs entire cultures. The larger poem restores the possibility of experiencing wholeness and unity:

As if the crude collops came together as one,
A mythological form, a festival sphere,
A great bosom, beard and being, alive with age. (CP 466)

In the absence of “communications,” we exist as “crude collops,” that is, isolated, spiritless hunks of flesh (a particularly unflattering variety of “thingness” to attribute to nature’s alleged epitome). By presenting fresh views and fresh terms for expressing them, the larger poem creates what “An Ordinary Evening” later calls “An opening for outpouring” (CP 483), the wherewithal for “[coming] together as one.” To say that, though new, the larger poem is “alive with age” is to say that it subsumes rather than supplants previous views, previous poems. Connection and wholeness are the focus, too, in the figure of the “mythological form.” This form, perhaps the “second giant” mentioned in the first canto, is a secular equivalent of the deity, in whose being the faithful are animated and united. Like the “festival sphere,” the mythological form is a figure for recent imaginings of reality, larger poems.

Canto I also initiates the poem’s discourse on reality—how it is defined and how it is experienced. At times, especially in its earlier cantos, “An Ordinary Evening” seems to equate reality with the physical world: “Love of the real / Is soft in three-four cornered fragrances” (CP 470). Near the end we hear what seems to be a different view: “reality exists / In the mind” (CP 485). In fact, neither of these options quite captures the poem’s ultimate resolution of the matter. This resolution is also foreshadowed in canto I, specifically in the phrase we have already had occasion to emphasize, “A recent imagining of reality. . . .” In “An Ordinary Evening,” reality obtains in the enlivening exchange between the imagination and the world through and on which the imagination works. All of the poem’s major concerns—those involving communications, the imagination, the functions of language, and the nature of reality—are best understood as aspects of the quest for unity and wholeness, the quest, that is, for closure. Considered from this vantage, the poem’s next several cantos exhibit a common strategy: to seem to entertain, while implicitly dismissing, spurious modes of achieving closure.

III

In a poem notorious for its difficulty, canto II seems especially intransigent. The problem lies in deciding whether the views that follow its opening hypothesis, “Suppose these houses are composed of ourselves” (CP 466), are the poet’s own. The vision has its seductions. Graceful touches such as the affectionate reference to “The far-fire flowing and the dim-coned bells,” for example, seem to lend credibility to the source from which they issue; and who could fault a “sense” that makes us the object “Of the perpetual meditation, point / Of the enduring, visionary love” (CP 466)? Stevens could, for one. The clue to reading canto II lies in recognizing its

pervasive fuzziness, which is due primarily to the unusual concentration of words such as “dim,” “obscure,” “uncertain,” “confused,” and especially “impalpable,” which appears three times in the first two tercets. Stevens was not interested in a world he could not touch. The kind of union promised by visionary idealism is no union at all, but rather a difference-ignoring, world-effacing identity. In canto III the poem briefly suspends its exposé of bogus closure to deal instead with bogus desire. The canto begins with a description of legitimate desire:

next to holiness is the will thereto,
And next to love is the desire for love,
The desire for its celestial ease in the heart. . . . (CP 467)

The desire for “holiness,” etymologically linked to “wholeness,” is next to holiness itself because it implies an admission of inadequacy and a determination to overcome that condition. Those in such a state are far closer to wholeness than those who have ceased to strive for it because they are confident they already possess it. One thinks especially of canto X’s man of bronze, who died because his mind was “made up” (CP 472). (“[M]ade up” is a richly multivalent phrase here, suggesting both that the man of bronze thinks he has all the answers and also that these answers are of someone else’s making and thus probably ill-understood.) With “But this cannot / Possess,” canto III turns to its depiction of desire gone wrong. That this type of desire is “set deep in the eye” suggests a disposition that precedes and corrupts vision, one that is imposed on every scene and finds every scene wanting: “Always in emptiness” (CP 467). Desire of this sort can never lead to wholeness.

Canto IV returns to Stevens’ inventory of illegitimate “communications,” depicting the case of a “plain” man who, having despaired of ever finding answers to his deepest questions, abandons the quest and takes refuge in a presumed union with a presumed deity. The experience leaves him “muted and comforted”

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

Whatever value seems to inhere in the plain man’s simple harmonies and accords quickly evaporates when Stevens equates them with “A responding to a diviner opposite.” The “diviner opposite” is a deity of expedience; those who worship it, like “the dry eucalyptus” that “seeks god in the rainy cloud” (CP 475), have invented the divinity they need. Finding themselves ignorant and weak, the faithful assume the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent, and therefore “opposite” being whose grand design explains the purpose of their pain. A similar mentality is captured in

canto XIII's definition of the "fresh spiritual," which is described in part as "The difficulty of the visible / To the nations of the clear invisible" (CP 474). Although the speaker realizes that closure is earned, if at all, only through rigorous questing in a physical world, an approach he later describes as being "serious" (CP 477) and "grim" (CP 475), there are those who cannot imagine what all the fuss is about, assuming that their allegiance to invisible deities gives them easy access to the answers. Stevens' point is not that all religious faith is this simplistic, only that much of it is and that accords promised by such faith cannot be taken seriously by those seeking genuine communications.

Canto IV's last two stanzas change the focus and widen the argument:

So lewd spring comes from winter's chastity.
So, after summer, in the autumn air,
Comes the cold volume of forgotten ghosts,

But soothingly, with pleasant instruments,
So that this cold, a children's tale of ice,
Seems like a sheen of heat romanticized. (CP 468)

Rendering nature safe for humankind, this might be called a plain man's account of the seasons. "[S]oothing[]," "pleasant," and "romanticized," this greeting-card picture bears scant resemblance to any actual workings of nature. The comfortable, even cloying relationship between humanity and nature assumed in this passage, accomplished as it is by reducing nature in the direction of the human, is no connection at all. The villain here is romance. Stevens' uses of the word "romance" most often designate referents that are wider but at the same time more precise than those assumed in common usage. In "An Ordinary Evening," romance is depicted as a kind of perversion or misapplication of the imagination, serving to increase rather than close the distances between ourselves and our worlds. In a context whose core values involve unity and wholeness, retreat into romance is thus an especially negative act, as is indicated by the frequency with which romances are exploded in the poem. Canto V's treatment of "Inescapable romance" is typical. The canto's third stanza indicates what might comprise such a romance:

A great town hanging pendant in a shade,
An enormous nation happy in a style,
Everything as unreal as real can be. . . . (CP 468)

"Inescapable romance" refers to the system of thought and belief we inherit, the "style" of the nation of which we are a part. In that we will never outgrow the influence of this shaping style, it is indeed inescapable. A nation's style, the collective perspective we earlier equated with a

culture's "poem," provides the terms its citizens use to understand things and by means of which they express this understanding. Presumably, at their inception, perhaps, these styles once were capable of negotiating genuine communication. As canto XX puts it, they were still "blue":

The town was a residuum,
.....
Yet the transcripts of it when it was blue remain. . . .
(CP 479)

Inevitably, however, these original terms are compromised by what canto VI calls "dense investiture" (CP 469), vitiating codicils grafted onto a style over time. What was meant to mediate, distances instead. In place of what is there, the nation's inhabitants see their own fabrications: "Not that which is but that which is apprehended, / A mirror, a lake of reflections" (CP 468).

The poem's most extended critique of romance occurs in canto XXI, which features two specimens: the "Romanza out of the black shepherd's isle" and an "alternate romanza" (CP 480). The first of these, said to be a response to "necessity, the will of wills," I take to consist of the various myths used to account for and mitigate the fact of human death. The quasi-pastoral ring of "the black shepherd's isle" is reminiscent of canto IV's similarly motivated reduction of nature. With death safely trimmed to human design, we are free to defer indefinitely a coming to terms with the ultimate necessity. The canto's second romance is the "opposite of Cythère," the mythological island where objects of desire perpetually elude their pursuers' perpetual advances. The alternate romance is opposite to Cythère in that it fosters the illusion of possession. This "Close to the senses" romance consists of the quotidian routines—social, domestic, professional—that, in rendering the world familiar, inure us to it. Under the influence of this romance, our "senses give and nothing take." Instead, that is, of seeking an enlivening connection with the world, we confine ourselves to the straitened scenarios we impose upon it. What was designed as a means is mistaken for the whole, and the world is lost to us.

Deluded romantics and those whose minds are "made up" may well ask "Why, then, inquire . . .?" (CP 468); but the speaker is more exacting. With this rhetorical question, he turns from his inventory of solipsistic identities, lethal romances, and spurious harmonies to develop his own more credible suggestions as to how closure is achieved.

IV

What the plain man and the man of bronze have in common is their stultifying fealty to endings. As the speaker embarks on his quest, it looks at first as if he is in danger of making the opposite mistake: "Reality," he muses, "is the beginning not the end, / Naked Alpha, not the hierophant

Omega" (CP 469). The reasons for this preference have already been suggested. At some point in their progress from pristine beginnings to advanced age, cultures grow so congested with "vassals" (CP 469) and their baggage that they cease to be viable. As the end of canto I made clear, however, the appropriate response to the death of a culture is not to bury it. The new, larger poem will not be Edenic, not what canto XXII disparagingly calls a "predicate of bright origin" (CP 481). Instead the new construct is to be "alive with age," made richer and more resonant by the enduring presence of the earlier poems it has subsumed. The speaker recognizes as much at the end of canto VI when he adjusts his description of reality: "Alpha continues to begin. / Omega is refreshed at every end" (CP 469). But what does this orphic pronouncement, which reprises canto I's suggestions regarding "anding/ending," actually mean? And where in the poem is there evidence for a reality thus construed?

These issues are addressed most explicitly in canto X's discussion of the man of bronze. After citing another symptom of his affliction ("His spirit is imprisoned in constant change"), the passage suggests a preferable mode of being: "But ours is not imprisoned. It resides / In a permanence composed of impermanence" (CP 472). The passage is one of several in Stevens' later poetry that refer to a permanence brought into being by and existing simultaneously with impermanence. In "The Rock," for example, the leaves are said to "bud and bloom and bear their fruit without change" (CP 527). Though spring yields to summer and summer to fall, they do so without change because their modulation makes manifest the enduring pattern, the cycle of the seasons, of which they are a part. In canto X of "An Ordinary Evening," Stevens celebrates two more examples of permanence composed of impermanence, the earth's rotation upon its axis and the orbit described in the earth's circuit around the sun:

So that morning and evening are like promises kept,
So that the approaching sun and its arrival,
Its evening feast and the following festival,

This faithfulness of reality, this mode,
This tendance and venerable holding-in
Make gay the hallucinations in surfaces. (CP 472)

Here "tendance," the earth's tendency to careen off on its own, is balanced by the "venerable holding-in," the centripetal force generated in the earth's traffic with the sun, without which the planet's eccentric course would lead to ruin. (This orbit can, in turn, be read as emblematic of any relationship in which an individual's tendency to exist as "a thing apart" is balanced by the pull of other beings.) The passage, as apt and moving as anything Stevens ever wrote, is an especially good illustration of the

imagination's power to keep communications vital—in this instance, between ourselves and the light.

The relationship between the impermanent and the permanent illustrated here is precisely that relationship traced in our earlier look at the workings of metaphor, with, for example, the seasons corresponding to that paradigm's vehicles or "ands" and the experience of the seasonal cycle corresponding to its tenor or end. The human role here is twofold: we are both participant "ands" and, when using our imaginative powers to their fullest, the agents through whom "ends" are realized. This latter role is well articulated in "The Rock." There the external world is said to consist of "gray particular[s]" (CP 528) that exist in isolation, unaware of one another and of their potential for vital connection but invested with "incipient colorings" (CP 526). The function of the imagination, acting as what Stevens calls the world's "rhapsodist" (CP 528) (etymologically, one who "stitches together"), is to bring to realization the world's colorings and connections—its forms, essential similarities, and physical laws. (As will be discussed in section V of this essay, readers perform an analogous function with their "colorings," that is, interpretations, of poems.) Canto XXVI of "An Ordinary Evening," while providing an especially rich example of rhapsodic coloration, also gives us another term for "permanence composed of impermanence":

How facilely the purple blotches fell
On the walk, purple and blue, and red and gold,
Blooming and beaming and voluming colors out.

Away from them, capes, along the afternoon Sound,
Shook off their dark marine in lapis light.
The sea shivered in transcendent change, rose up

As rain and booming, gleaming, blowing, swept
The wateriness of green wet in the sky.
Mountains appeared with greater eloquence

Than that of their clouds. These lineaments were the
earth,
Seen as inamorata, of loving fame
Added and added out of a fame-full heart . . . (CP 484)

"Fame" derives ultimately from a Greek word meaning "to speak." The passage's flamboyant modulations of shape and shade celebrate not only the earth's glorious fecundity but also our own ability to realize and express our ardor for the earth's lineaments through the only agency equal to the task, imaginative speech. It is not the modulations alone that are celebrated in this passage, however, but also the sense that they all—

speaker, sound, sea, and sky—element a bounteous whole. They comprise another instance of metaphoric aniding/ending or, as it is put in the passage's second stanza, "transcendent change." The nature of transcendent change is further defined on those occasions in which this condition is conspicuously absent, when the speaker himself seems to be "imprisoned in constant change." In canto XVI, for example, he views the approach of daylight as something quite different from "promises kept":

Silently it heaves its youthful sleep from the sea—
The Oklahoman—the Italian blue
Beyond the horizon with its masculine,

Their eyes closed, in a young palaver of lips.
And yet the wind whimpers oldly of old age
In the western night. The venerable mask,

In this perfection, occasionally speaks
And something of death's poverty is heard. (*CP* 476–77)

This difficult passage seems to describe a moment when, while it is still dark in Oklahoma, day has come to Italy, which is therefore "blue." Italy is also "masculine" because, in the light and therefore visible, its features rise above the horizon beyond which lies Oklahoma. The moment when Oklahoma joins those regions already in the light is described as a kiss, the sexual image suggesting perhaps the mutually generating relationship between night and day.

But the "venerable mask" witnessing the scene, presumably the speaker or the elderly Stevens himself, takes little pleasure in it. He dwells instead on what change has taken from him—youthfulness and sexuality—and on what he has still to lose, suggested here in the figure of "western night," which he is unable to disassociate from its traditional suggestions of death. Preoccupied with the destructive implications of life's impermanence, he fails to recognize and value the potential for permanence that impermanence can entail. "This," the passage continues "should be tragedy's most moving face" (*CP* 477). The occasion is not tragic, however, any more than it is comic—a possibility entertained briefly in canto XVII: "The color is almost the color of comedy" (*CP* 477). In Stevens' view, reading any scene as either comic or tragic imparts to it a specious conclusiveness inconsistent with his belief that the only finality is a momentary one. The occasion, instead, is "serious": "The strength at the centre is serious"; "This is the mirror of the high serious" (*CP* 477). Etymologically linked to a medieval Latin word meaning "series" or "seriatim," "serious," as Stevens uses it here, is further evidence that the "and yet, and yet, and yet—" of canto I should not be read as negative and closure-subverting. A serious approach to life is one that acknowledges the persistence of change and the conse-

quent need to continue realizing new permanencies. A serious approach is also "grim":

not grim
Reality but reality grimly seen

And spoken in paradisaal parlance new
And in any case never grim, the human grim
That is part of the indifference of the eye

Indifferent to what it sees. (CP 475)

The romantics and made-up minds criticized at such length earlier in the poem see what they want to see and are in this sense indifferent to what might actually be "out there." Without their self-serving projections their worlds would be bereft of meaning and purpose, a "grim / Reality," indeed. "[R]eality grimly seen" is another matter. A grim, that is, stern and uncompromising mode of seeing and thinking involves another sort of indifference, a willingness to relinquish bias in the attempt to see more clearly. To the extent that we succeed in this enterprise, we become aware of yet a third possible type of "indifference," what Barbara Fisher, in her discussion of "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," calls a "linking sense":

the linking sense of *in differences* yields a couple drawn together . . . in spite of, perhaps because of, differentiation—with all their distinguishing characteristics, contrarities, disputes, and disagreements intact. (94)

In "An Ordinary Evening," difference and change are aspects of the same phenomenon, "change" being its appropriate name when the reference is to process and "difference" applying when the reference is to a state or condition. Just as permanence, for Stevens, exists only as a result of and in change, so difference is the *sine qua non* of unity, unity being a condition in which, as Fisher puts it, the constituent "contrarities" remain "intact." In "An Ordinary Evening" the functioning of difference is most evident on the numerous occasions when the cognates "converse," "version," "traverse," and even "verse" are used to explore a variety of issues associated with their common root "versus." Canto VIII, for example, tropes on "converse" and "conversation" in its account of the "syllable / Of recognition . . . / The cry that contains its converse in itself" (CP 471). To say that the "cry contains its converse" is to say that the expression of a version or view invites opposition from those holding a different view. Inasmuch as "cry" comes from a Latin word meaning "a citizen's call for help," the passage suggests that all our conversation is a cry for help in that it calls upon our fellows to enlarge us by responding.

Conversation, in which speech is the major but not the only operative element, thus possesses a power similar to that attributed to the larger poem in canto I. If the cry contains its converse, it follows that the converse—which includes the conversant—has become a part of the “crier.” The fact that, as Stevens puts it in “The Course of a Particular,” “being part is an exertion that declines” (*OP* 123) in no way invalidates the closural nature of a given union. Just as the process of change that brings experiences of impermanent permanence into existence will in time carry them out of existence, so the differences out of which unity is generated will inevitably reassume their merely divisive nature.

Of course, the differing parts of a potential whole do not simply gather of their own accord and spontaneously generate unity. Communications, as described by Stevens, presuppose a desiring agent, the same agent whose discovery of a lack or disconnection initiates the process and whose willed creations complete it. The object of a more direct scrutiny elsewhere in his poetry and prose, desire is present in “An Ordinary Evening” mostly by implication, as in canto VIII’s treatment of the motives governing the cry of conversation. Desire is explicitly invoked three times in “An Ordinary Evening.” The first of these references, as we have already noticed, occurs in canto III: “next to love is the desire for love, / The desire for its celestial ease in the heart” (*CP* 467). This passage provides, in effect, a definition of terms, the desire for love and the desire for holiness being depicted as expressions of the same aboriginal desire for wholeness and completeness.

A second explicit reference to desire occurs in canto XXIII: “Desire prolongs its adventure to create / Forms of farewell, furtive among green ferns” (*CP* 482). This difficult stanza cannot be understood without first comprehending the difficult canto it concludes. The canto begins with another account of the relationship between the imagination and its “other,” represented here by the sun, which is said to be “half the world, half everything, / The bodiless half” (*CP* 481). The natural world is bodiless because, in and of itself, it has no form; it is simply “This illumination, this elevation, this future” (*CP* 481). To say that the particulars that make up this world are an “illumination” or “elevation” is to say that they simply appear; they become present to human consciousness, which recognizes them initially as simply a “there.” The “other half” of the world is the force that informs and embodies, that is, the imagination, which is described as being “big over those that sleep” a “single sleep” “Unfretted by day’s separate, several selves” (*CP* 482). This part of canto XXIII depicts the imagination as an endowment that is peculiar to human beings and that, as such, is what most distinguishes us from the sun’s half of the world. Although we have the ability to transcend this separation and make “everything come together as one,” “disembodiments / Still keep occurring” (*CP* 482): time and change constantly undo our formulations and communications. In this ceaselessly disembodied world, the indefinitely prolonged function of desire is to assist in the creation of viable new forms.

But what does it mean to say that these are “Forms of farewell, furtive among green ferns”? The rudiments of an answer can be found in the etymological origins of “fern,” the Old Norse precursor of which meant “of last year” or simply “old.” That the forms are at once green and old would make them yet another incarnation of the impermanently permanent, with green signifying the constantly changing natural world and the enduring fern suggesting permanence. Because forms inevitably change and die, their creation necessarily entails their destruction and thus “farewells.” The third explicit reference to desire occurs at the end of canto XV, which focuses solely on its creative potential. Here “light will” or “the hand of desire” has the power to relieve life’s heaviness, to engage the formidable forces of difference and change and to create from them “communications” that, for a time, transcend their destructiveness.

Stevens’ account of the ways that unity depends on difference culminates in the final canto’s engagement with what I take to be the poem’s pivotal concept, “traversing”:

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

An unusually multivalent word, “traverse” is unusual, too, in the degree to which its meanings differ from one another. “Traverse” can denote the act of passing through, especially through a boundary; but it can also refer to something that thwarts or obstructs—such as a boundary. In the law, “traverse” signifies a rebuttal of an argument made by the opposition. Reinforcing this latter sense is the fact that its root, “verse,” derives from the Latin *versus*, for “turning.” Critics who read Stevens’ poetry as an elaboration of unresolved contraries—what Keith Manecke calls “the forwarding of a position and then an immediate backstep[ping] from it” (83)—are likely to consider these implications of “traverse” strong evidence for their views. Before we can counter that supposition, we will need to look more closely at the stanza’s traversing agents and subjects: dust, shade, and force.

What is said of the rock in Stevens’ poem of that name, that it is a “gray particular,” applies at least as well to dust in “An Ordinary Evening.” When regarded as the remains of something that once gave them form and unity, dust particles are characterized chiefly by their discreteness, their difference or “apartness.” But dust also has the potential for re-formation, that is, for becoming a part of something new. In traversing the dust, the shade makes manifest the dust’s “two-in-one” metaphorically established nature, a nature in which one aspect need not be suspended before the other can prevail, but in which both can obtain simultaneously. When traversed by the final line’s “force,” the shade similarly exhibits multiple, seemingly mutually exclusive aspects. “Shade” can designate

not only an eclipsing shadow that obliterates things, reducing them to shades or ghosts of themselves, but also hues, suggestive of the colorings latent in the gray particulars of our lives. These two aspects of shade are actually, again, two-in-one, the “one” this time being the imagination, which, like Shelley’s western wind, “decreases” the false and clichéd as it produces “recent imaginings.” The act of traversing, a variant on the act of making metaphors, brings together multiple and potentially conflicting “ands” in such a way that, rather than canceling one another out, they cooperate in creating a single rich end or being.

By speculating that reality might be a shade, but then again it might be another sort of force, Stevens suggests that it is neither of these but rather a product of the two working in combination. For Stevens, there is no reality residing independently, “out there.” Reality, as we hear late in the poem, exists “In the mind”; but it does not exist even there until the imagination interacts with the traversing force referenced in the poem’s final line. What, then, is this force? Charles Altieri, speculating on various relations between metaphor and actuality in Stevens, has provided some useful terms with which to begin an identification. “Stevens,” he writes, “tries to imagine in secular terms a totally concrete force where substance calls to spirit at the same time as spirit completes the potential within substance” (“Metaphors” 35). “Substance” would seem to be nothing other than the dust featured notably both in the final stanza of “An Ordinary Evening” and in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” where it is incarnated as mud in that poem’s “muddy centre” (CP 363) trope.

Whether dust or mud, Stevensian substance is perceptible and palpable but is formless and unknowable until completed in its engagement with another mysterious center, “The centre of transformations” (CP 383), which I take to signify the imagination. “Substance” is thus roughly synonymous with “object” or “the other,” their common referent being the world beyond the self, a world we may think we know but which is, in actuality, opaque to us as long as we mistake what is for what is apprehended, our own “lake of reflections” (CP 468). Adapting Altieri’s observation to the present context, then, I would suggest that it is not substance itself that calls to the spirit or imagination but, rather, the aforementioned colorings and connections latent within the mud of substance, a latency best described in the same passage from “Notes”:

There was a muddy centre before we breathed.
There was a myth before the myth began,
Venerable and articulate and complete. (CP 383)

This ur-myth and the tropism it generates constitute the traversing force featured in the last line of “An Ordinary Evening.” Our “shadings” or “recent imaginings” are the various, constantly regenerating human myths that give form and presence to the prior myths latent in substance. In ef-

fecting this impermanently permanent coincidence between human myth and the “myth before the myth began,” the mind realizes both itself and the now no longer “other” as mutually defining parts of the same whole; that is to say, it experiences closure.

As far as I know, Altieri has not made the specific identification I make between the force he describes in the passage cited above and the force featured at the end of “An Ordinary Evening”; and it seems unlikely he would agree with my comments regarding “realizations.” Writing in another context about Stevens’ “endlessly proliferating incarnations of the spirit in the flesh,” he rejects the notion that these incarnations accomplish a change-transcending wholeness: “The mind must try to imagine itself as a whole, even as it knows that in so doing it only proliferates itself” (*Painterly Abstraction* 347). In this respect, Altieri’s reading of “An Ordinary Evening” resembles those I challenged earlier in this essay for attributing “endlessly proliferating” implications to the repetition of “and yet” in canto I and ultimately to the poem as a whole. As we have seen, Stevens readily accepts, indeed embraces, the fact that “incarnations” (what we earlier called “perspectives”) proliferate indefinitely, but rejects the notion that this process can have no end. To read “An Ordinary Evening” as “a ‘never-ending’ procession of qualifications” (as Fink does), to fail to recognize or credit the poem’s endorsement of “permanence composed of impermanence,” is to mistake traversals for reversals.

As we have seen, “An Ordinary Evening” abounds with passages that describe unity emerging out of difference and permanence temporarily transcending change. In addition to these implicit rebuttals, the poem features at least one passage that explicitly repudiates the anti-closuralist position. This engagement occurs in canto XXIV where the speaker describes the destruction of the statue of Jove, which I take to be emblematic of the supplanting of any established ordering by a “recent imagining of reality” or “larger poem”:

Before the thought of evening had occurred
Or the sound of *Incomincia* had been set,

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

A knowing that something certain had been proposed,
Which, without the statue, would be new,
An escape from repetition, a happening

In space and the self, that touched them both at once
And alike. . . . (CP 482–83)

The passage revisits several issues addressed elsewhere in the poem. In that space and the self are said to be involved "at once" in the immanent event, this transformative moment can be read as another example of what this essay calls a "realization." The focus on transcendent change is here as well, for the moment of advent is described as being out of time, poised at the point where the "anding/anding" of mere repetition yields to the anding/ending that is something truly new. In the same breath, however, the speaker introduces qualifications that seem to jeopardize the moment's status and significance. By mentioning that the afternoon is not over, he reminds us that it soon will be and that, though no one has yet thought of it, evening and ending inevitably impend. These lines would seem to be another prime exhibit for those critics who contend that incarnations such as the one announced here are inevitably invalidated by the evening consequences of subsequent events. Again, I do not think the passage supports such conclusions. In Stevens' view, the fact that this "happening" will inevitably dissolve in no way diminishes its closural nature. With its intimation of the moment's fragility, the passage is simply recognizing the dominion of the process that, for all its destructiveness, is what enables us to experience unity and timelessness in the first place. The speaker demonstrates here the same wisdom that is expressed in canto II of "Credences of Summer":

And fill the foliage with arrested peace,
Joy of such permanence, right ignorance
Of change still possible. (*CP* 373)

"[R]ight ignorance / Of change still possible" is a condition not of unawareness but of heightened awareness. Like the speaker in "Credences of Summer," those who destroy the statue of Jove and share in a new and different certainty have learned from past experience that their happening cannot last. But they have also learned better than to let either foreknowledge or hindsight invalidate what they know to be true or deflate their attendant sense of well being.

Those who read Stevens' poetry as a parade of equivocations and reversals are likely to have little patience with references, such as mine here, to the truth in and of his work. I think objections such as these derive from misreadings of Stevens' characteristic treatment of difference and change and from reliance on a by now long-defunct definition of truth. "We have been," says Stevens in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," "a little insane about the truth" (*NA* 33). A younger Stevens, by his own admission, had shared this insanity regarding the truth, having assumed with his culture that there must exist some sort of absolute truth, what in "Landscape with Boat" he calls "A truth beyond all truths" (*CP* 242). By the time he was writing his mature poetry, however, he had a very different conception: "Perhaps," he writes in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," "The

truth depends on a walk around a lake" and reveals itself in what he calls "balances"—as when "a man and a woman meet and love forthwith" (*CP* 386). For Stevens, truth is experiential, the ringing true that obtains in moments of realization or closure, moments in which communication and thus wholeness emerge out of difference. Truth is not absolute. Like closure, truth, for Stevens, is temporarily final, a sense that is reinforced by the word's original meaning, to make a "covenant" or "alliance." Both a state and an experience, both cognitive and affective, truth is that condition of understanding/loving that Stevens saw obtaining both in nonliterary experience—as when one relates to the earth as one's "inamorata"—and in poems, that, as he says in "The Rock," "bloom as a man loves, as he lives in love" and "bear their fruit so that the year is known" (*CP* 527).

In "An Ordinary Evening," as we have seen, realizations come to those who demonstrate an "indifference of the eye," "indifference" in this instance denoting a willingness to risk an unbiased, unselfish engagement with other beings and things. Such an approach is prerequisite to developing a "perspective" that accommodates rather than subsumes the perspectives of others. That being the case, one way of describing an especially rich "I" would be to picture it as comprised of many eyes, many different perspectives. The speaker of canto XXX is such an individual, in some respects diminished by time but, as Stevens puts it in canto I, "alive with age":

The barrenness that appears is an exposing.
It is not part of what is absent, a halt
For farewells, a sad hanging on for remembrances.

It is a coming on and a coming forth. (*CP* 487)

The landscape is barren because it is late autumn but also because the speaker's "grim" approach to it is free of subjective embellishment. Thus, although it is his personal autumn as well, the speaker does not impose "death's poverty" on the scene as he had earlier when confronted by "western night." He views the season and his old age as occasions not for dwelling on life's impermanence and lamenting what he has lost but for celebrating the vital process that is always beginning and the capacities he has acquired in that process:

The glass of the air becomes an element—
It was something imagined that has been washed away.
A clearness has returned. It stands restored.

It is not an empty clearness, a bottomless sight.
It is a visibility of thought,
In which hundreds of eyes, in one mind, see at once.

(*CP* 488)

To this point our discussion has focused primarily on what this essay has identified as “existential” closure, realizations generated in our engagements with “the earth seen as inamorata.” What remains to be considered is how “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” conceives of poetic closure and how the two sorts of closure are related. Featured throughout Stevens’ mature work, these issues are most explicitly addressed in “The Rock,” especially through its elaborate “fiction of the leaves” (CP 526). A look at the workings of this central figure should help in identifying and understanding how these same issues play out in “An Ordinary Evening.”

In “The Rock” the speaker experiences existential closure in a moment of intense insight and connection—“The blooming and the musk / Were being alive, an incessant being alive” (CP 526)—that comes to him after an extended period of despair. Stevens likens this experience to a “cover[ing]” of the rock by leaves, the rock in this context signifying an external world with which, until the moment of realization, the speaker had no vital connection. The problem with coverings is that, like the other impermanent permanencies discussed in this essay, they do not last; sooner or later, the “leaves” withdraw: unity in difference degenerates into mere difference and the world reverts again to a flat assemblage of dark things. But the same leaves and their fruit are also made to represent poetry, which “The Rock” associates with a more enduring type of closure. Rather than simply covering the rock, poetry has the power to “cure” both the rock and ourselves, where “ourselves” signifies both poets and their readers. To cure in this context is to enable communications that are “beyond forgetfulness” (CP 526), that is, permanent. Poets initiate this cure by presenting us with what Stevens, in a figure reminiscent of a “recent imagining of reality,” calls the fruit’s “fresh culls,” that is, a creation that

makes meanings of the rock,
Of such mixed motion and such imagery
That its barrenness becomes a thousand things
And so exists no more. (CP 527)

The assertion that “meanings” issue from “mixed motion” echoes this essay’s earlier account of how a dynamic interaction among metaphoric elements (“ands” in our original formulation; “images” in the present passage) makes possible the kind of resolution or end of these elements we have termed closure. But for Stevens, poetic closure involves more than well-made verse. The good poem should be understood, rather, as a kind of matrix of potential resolutions, “closure” being the name for what happens when this potential is realized in good readings of the poem. As Stevens puts it in “The Rock,” a poem is a “final found” (CP 527). Poets create or “found” poems. But “found” can also, of course, signify discov-

ery; and this possibility directs our attention not only to what poets have found in the part of the “rock” that is the occasion for their poems but also to what the readers find in these poems. Readers are responsible for making the poem their own by reading it well, an activity figured in “The Rock” as their eating of the fruit’s “incipient colorings.” To ingest a poem—as with the activity to which reading is being compared here, that is, the consumption of the communion host—is to bring new life both to oneself and to what one “eats.” It is to experience closure. For the late Stevens, a poem is, in fact, the realization of the poet’s words (the incipient poem) in its readers’ colorings or interpretations.

Closure, then, is both a property latent within the structure of the poem as written and a potential aspect of the reader’s experience of the poem. Closure does not obtain until the two come together. The relationship between reader and poem is, thus, directly analogous to the relationship traced in the last section of this essay between the human imagination and “the myth before the myth began.” Just as the ur-myths and the imagining self are mutually constitutive, so the incipient poem calls into being the reader’s experience of the poem and, complementarily, this experience “realizes” the poem’s incipencies. Good poems are both constant and changing. The incipient poem is permanent in that it continues to be present; but interpretations change as different people in different places and times find in the poem “New senses in the engenderings of sense” (CP 527). Good readings realize the poem’s timeless potential for “being alive.”

Although in a somewhat less explicit and systematic fashion, both aspects of poetic closure are featured prominently in “An Ordinary Evening.” Canto XXVII’s frequently cited discussion of the theory of poetry, for example, indicates the extent to which poems are “created” by their audiences:

This endlessly elaborating poem
Displays the theory of poetry,
As the life of poetry. A more severe,

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

The passage plays on two senses of the word “life,” one referring to experience generally and the second denoting that which especially animates or distinguishes an experience or a thing. As Bloom and others have observed, “theory” comes from the Greek for a “viewing” or “contemplation.” To say that the theory of poetry is the life of poetry is thus to say that what makes a poem come alive, and what keeps it alive, is a creative reading or hearing. Stevens’ selection of the conspicuous “extemporize”

contributes to the passage's further suggestion that poems are a- or supra-temporal. Although the contemporary denotation of "extemporize" is "speaking of the moment," its etymological root, the Latin *extempore*, means "out of the time." This pointed juxtaposition reinforces the notion that poems have the potential for becoming alive—of the moment—in future as well as present readers. A similar suggestion is made by "endlessly elaborating" in the first line of this passage. As has often been noted, Stevens uses the phrase in part to poke fun at his own long-windedness. Some critics read it also as corroboration of the point they claim is made by the proliferation of conflicting perspectives in "An Ordinary Evening," that is, that closure is an impossibility. In this context, so much of which is concerned to show the timelessness of poetry, the opposite conclusion seems more plausible. To "elaborate" is to "work out" or to "produce by labor." A poem that elaborates "endlessly" is thus one that retains its potential for working out—that is, enabling closure—over time.

Whether the experiences go by the name of "theor[izing]," as in "An Ordinary Evening," or "color[ing]," as in "The Rock," audiences cannot experience closure unless the poems that they "ingest" are possessed of incipient closure. In "The Rock" Stevens uses the "mixed motion" figure to represent the dynamic interaction of metaphoric elements that generates a poem's incipencies. In "An Ordinary Evening," that role falls to "reverberation," the focal concept of Professor Eucalyptus' much-discussed search for God, described in canto XIV. The professor, whose quest parallels the speaker's own, seeks

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

The description that makes it divinity, still speech
As it touches the point of reverberation. . . . (CP 475)

What may seem at first glance one of Stevens' more opaque passages is actually built around a rather straightforward argument: God is not some sort of transcendent being but, rather, is entailed in the objects around us. This God does not achieve "divinity," however, until described. Description consists of, or is perhaps synonymous with, "commodious adjective[s]" whose goal is to achieve a "point of reverberation." Although the logical flow of the passage seems clear enough, its key terms obviously need some fleshing out.

In "An Ordinary Evening," as is typical of Stevens' late verse, references to God are almost invariably associated with the fact of human need, whether the expression of that need be the "plain" (CP 467) man's invention of a "diviner opposite" or the speaker's more rigorous quest to achieve wholeness or "holiness." If God is in objects, it follows that human fulfill-

ment depends on whether and how we connect with these objects. This seems merely another way of making the major point of section IV of this essay, which is that we exist in the being of other beings and things that, previous to the “realizations” we experience with them, are mere objects to us. As noted in that same section, we qualify for this closural experience by making ourselves open to the object, that is, by relinquishing egotistical preconceptions and agendas. This prescription is notably consistent with one of the original denotations of “God”: “that to which sacrifice is made.” Just as our “being alive” presupposes meaningful connection with the object/God, so the existence of the object requires a contribution from the human “subject,” specifically, the kind of activity known as description. It is worth noting that “describe” comes from the Latin *describere*, which means “to copy off” or “transcribe,” a fact consistent with our earlier observation that—for the late Stevens, at least—creativity is the ability not to invent from nothing but to identify and give fresh life to “myths” already latent in the object world. Whatever its contribution, description consists preeminently of “commodious adjective[s].”

The word “adjective” appears twice in “An Ordinary Evening,” serving each time as a synecdoche for larger forms of description. In the present passage, in addition to its customary referents, “adjective” is meant to signify entire poems. In order to realize an object’s divinity, the adjective/poem must be commodious. It must, that is, be ample and apt, qualities that—like fullness, wholeness, and completeness—are associated throughout “An Ordinary Evening” with closure, a state or experience that in this context is generated by “reverberation.” “[T]he point of reverberation” is an especially resonant phrase, with “point” referring to purpose as well as place, and “reverberation” designating an attribute both of poems and their occasions. Considered as an aspect of poetry, the point of reverberation is virtually synonymous with what, in our discussion of “The Motive for Metaphor,” we called “the point of resolution,” the closural end generated in the traffic among the poem’s metaphorically related “ands.” The stillness of “still speech” is this constant end or point created in the poem’s reverberation. The first two stanzas of canto XII echo and expand on this argument.

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

Not as it was: part of the reverberation
Of a windy night as it is. . . . (CP 473)

As noted earlier in this essay, the metaphor-in-large that is a poem is not about a res that preexists the poem; the res is the poem itself, the product of its metaphorically generated reverberations.

According to the traditional Christian apologetics that provide Stevens' point of departure in canto XIV, the purpose of life is to attain a more complete knowledge of, and thus similarity to, God. The reward for meeting this responsibility sufficiently well is an eternal life whose salient feature is the clear vision of God that is unavailable to us while in our fallen earthly state. In Stevens' secular formulation, the goal of quests such as the professor's is not to know a traditional God but simply to know. "Divinity" is experienced in our knowing/loving communications with the beings and objects around us. Where traditional Christianity holds that spiritual progress is manifested in ever-closer approximations of the beatific vision, Stevens' implicit counsel is that we enlarge ourselves in the creation of successively more commodious havens, more recent imaginings, larger poems.

As many critics have observed, "reverberation[s]" also suggests "reverberings," which might be understood as the use of "paradise parlance new" to effect recent imaginings. Why reverbering might be in order is a recurring focus in "An Ordinary Evening." Canto IX, for example, speaks of the need to keep coming back "To the real: to the hotel instead of the hymns. . . ." The agent of return is to be

The poem of pure reality, untouched
By trope or deviation, straight to the word,
Straight to the transfixing object. . . . (CP 471)

In expressing a preference for poems untouched by tropes, the speaker is clearly not advocating the avoidance of tropes generally. "[U]ntouched," of course, is itself a trope, one of literally hundreds out of which Stevens fashions "An Ordinary Evening." Canto IX's caveats apply, rather, to bad troping, obfuscating clichés such as those Stevens satirized in poems such as "The Man on the Dump," or, on a wider scale, to the worn out conventions of entire nations or cultures.

The problem with exhausted tropes is well illustrated in canto XI's "lion of Juda" passage:

We remember the lion of Juda and we save
The phrase . . . Say of each lion of the spirit

It is a cat of a sleek transparency
That shines with a nocturnal shine alone.
The great cat must stand potent in the sun.

The phrase grows weak. The fact takes up the strength
Of the phrase. It contrives the self-same evocations. . . .
(CP 472-73)

The lion of Juda figure, which we know primarily from The Book of Revelation, was originally an expression of admiration for King David's masterful leadership and valor in battle. Presumably the linking of man and lion possessed an insight-promoting aptness that resonated in the imaginations of the figure's earliest users. But, as time passed and it was applied to an ever-increasing number and variety of referents, the phrase grew weak. The metaphor collapsed into a synonym for its referent; or, as canto XI puts it, the metaphor came to have the "self-same evocations" as the fact—the cat became transparent. If the phrase is to work again, it will need reverbing—Juda must become New Haven.

There is a sense in which reverbing applies to whole poems as well as to individual tropes. We have already seen that audiences, in effect, reverb a poem when they take it into themselves in an act of good reading. But there is another, wider sense in which the concept applies, a sense captured most explicitly in "A Primitive Like an Orb" and its discussion of the "essential poem at the centre of things" (CP 440). The central poem, which "An Ordinary Evening" incarnates in its figure of the "larger" poem, is said to be "seen and known in lesser poems" but also to "beget[]" them (CP 440–41). The central or larger poem is a kind of archetype, both created in and generative of the succession of major works that constitute the literary history of a culture. Periodically, the accumulation of new ideas and events creates a need for a "reverbing" of the archetype, the creation of a larger, more inclusive poem that is better able to speak to the "larger audience" that has developed since the archetype's last incarnation. Thus the speaker advises painters (and, implicitly, poets) in canto XVIII to "paint / In the present state of painting and not the state / Of thirty years ago" (CP 478). In the terms developed earlier in this essay, each new major poem represents an "and" whose contribution to the archetype-creating and expressing succession of major poems necessitates a realignment of the metaphoric relationship among them, ensuring that the "end" that is the archetype remains "alive with age."

"An Ordinary Evening" develops these issues further in the figure of the hidalgo, which in this context signifies the archetypal poet or perhaps a personified version of the central, larger poem:

Nothing about him ever stayed the same,
Except this hidalgo and his eye and tune,
.....

The commonplace became a rumpling of blazons.
What was real turned into something most unreal,
Bare beggar-tree, hung low for fruited red

In isolated moments—isolations
Were false. The hidalgo was permanent, abstract,

A hatching that stared and demanded an answering
look. (CP 483–84)

The *hidalgo* is the only being or thing in the poem explicitly referred to as “permanent,” a status it apparently owes to the way it is created, that is, by “hatching,” a process roughly analogous to the workings of metaphor. Just as the thematic center of a poem is an end created by the interaction among its constituent elements, so the *hidalgo* is a permanence generated—“hatched” in another sense of that word—through the incremental adumbrations contributed by its various avatars, the great authors of the world’s great poems. “*Hidalgo*” comes from a Spanish word meaning “son of something.” In that each new version of the archetype is generated out of those that preceded it, the relationship between them could be called that of father to son. In a context where poetry is equated with divinity, it is not unreasonable to suggest a second interpretation in which the “something” is God, lending plausibility to the further suggestion that the offices associated with poets, especially their powers of resurrecting the spiritually dead and enabling access to life out of time, are being likened to those of Christ. By suggesting this resemblance I do not mean to be conferring priority on the Christian story, which Stevens’ late work typically depicts as simply another set of myths that attempts to express the “myth before the myth began. . . .” In this regard the chief difference between Christianity and the poems that constitute Stevens’ own mythology is the former’s pretension to absoluteness, which renders it, in the terms of “*An Ordinary Evening*,” “imprisoned in constant change.”

VI

If it is possible for one passage to encapsulate a work of such length and complexity, that passage, in my judgment, would have to be the following from canto XV:

The instinct for heaven had its counterpart:
The instinct for earth, for New Haven, for his room,
The gay tournamonde as of a single world

In which he is and as and is are one. (CP 476)

In “*The Man with the Blue Guitar*,” the guitarist/poet’s literal-minded listeners insist that he play “things as they are.” Although the phrase need not be so narrowly construed, it is clear that this audience’s call for “things as they are” rests on the assumption that things have an existence in and of themselves and that the business of the poet is to help audiences relate to these things. The speaker resists such assumptions but is ambivalent as to what might constitute a more plausible relation between people and their worlds, poems and their occasions. By the time he wrote “*An Ordi-*

nary Evening," Stevens had learned to celebrate a world where the "as" of human imagining and knowing discovers and creates, if only briefly, the being of the known and where things that had existed as discrete "ands" can become, instead, parts of the same end and thus of one another. Stevens' conflation of "as" and "is" could, in fact, be construed as evidence that the notorious "thing in itself" was never anything more than a groundless fiction, that "being" has no referent for us until, awakening within "the very object that we seek" (CP 463), we discover that we have brought both ourselves and that object into existence: "It is, we are. / He is, we are." The passage also tropes, of course, on the temporal denotations of "as" and "is," their coincidence signifying, again, that privileged state "between is and was" (CP 474). To thus transcend both our own isolation and the destructiveness of time is to enjoy the impermanently permanent unity in difference that is closure.

University of North Carolina, Pembroke

Notes

¹ The ways in which poems achieve closure should not be confused with the ways they conclude. Although a poem's final lines typically carry a burden that is proportionately greater than that invested in its other elements, closure is a function of the pattern created by and in all of a poem's parts.

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Poems

The Click of Marbled Orbs

The stout man puffs on his Havana cigar
And picks canary chords on his blue guitar,
Fashions flawed words and spindrift sounds
Into day-glow verbs and glass-blown nouns.
How much the notion of a supreme fiction
Derives from bric-a-brac and spiffy diction
None knows. Say his thickest absolutes
Derive from blue rotundities of fruits:
His crispest jugglery performs the feat
Of hardening stealthy points into concrete
Trombones, sausage-makers, cattle skulls,
And pettifogging buds. His monocle's
Univocal, a prop that lets him see
Glories in pewter, and mere poetry.

William F. Dougherty
West Hartford, Conn.

Ash Burial for an Idea

Dismiss the timid believers in sense:
their simple crests
belie their red-inked sentiments.
Bring presents then, fill texts'
new cerements with filigree wire,
with fire-limned egrets circling thirteen rings.

Within this slipping premise, let
sense, descending, silt the riverine letters
tinged with debt; let the evening rise,
extending its gifted, eliding wings.

Michael Jones
Oakland, Calif.

The Dragonfly's Wing

1

In contrast with other four-winged insects, the fore and hind wings of dragonflies are not coupled; they function independently. Thanks to this double flight-power system, large dragonflies (*Anisoptera*) are capable of carrying out incredible flight manoeuvres. Even gliding flight is part of their repertoire. This behaviour enables us to interpret the wings of these animals as ultra-light aerofoils. Their quite astonishing performance demonstrates the effect of precise geometrical synchronization as a response to the static and aerodynamic demands placed on the dragonfly's wing.

2

This technical information from a chart
has intervened in time to stop the flight
my mind keeps making to a shady marsh
where wasted life may be resolved in art.
I feel the need to wake and set things right

before the fragile wings and bulbous eyes
break free to range beyond this artful slide.
So many friends have gone into that harsh
expanse that darting flights of dragonflies
become our perfect messengers; they glide

on wings extended just to catch the slight
updraft \ downdraft: so intricate each part
that helps the wing support the hazy ride!
And as we see them rising toward the light,
we keep the graceful shape to lift the heart.

Michael Stillman
Palo Alto, Calif.

The Old Man and the C

It seemed haphazard denouement.
—“The Comedian as the Letter C”

Shoemakers on holiday spy on soles,
praising the kickers who most wear and tear.

His life shrinking in possibility
so he must narrow narrow or vanish
he casts about for one last busy-work
simply to keep juggling balls overhead.
His options, listed primly black and white:
toss imagination out the window,
colonize Hatteras and ride out storms,
hibernate inside a nice shady house
(say, Ruark’s oaky place tucked in Southport)
where he could crawl across a kitchen floor
not to scrub but to cavort with grandtykes.
And so on. A rich alphabet of choice.

His scope shrinking in possibility
he opts to settle on the letter C,
for so many years entirely ignored
even when stumbled on in *cat, canine*,
even when imbibed in *coffee, cola*,
lisped in *cyanide, cipher, cenotaph*.

But why, you ask, settle on C? Why not?
As Mister Average Man he’d flaunt blandness,
never higher than third in any roll
but carboniferous, hence organic,
showing us all a trace of when and where,
hard as diamond, slick as graphite.
Keynote for major compositions, sign
indicating that where there’s heat there’s life.
Catholic or Celtic, Church or Congress,
Corps or Court: amidst flux he’d stay constant,
equal to hundreds, to hundred thousands.
He would light a candle where he stood,
he would establish norms for a canon,
he’d weigh to the final nth a carat,
center a centime to its truest worth,
infuse the general with tropic health.

That's not the half of what he'd undertake,
granted his tendency to overreach,
but surely you grasp his predicament?
If dissolving to *nada* loomed ahead
even kicking a can on dusty roads
in Idaho seemed much the better course.

Eugene Hollahan
Decatur, Ga.

That Walking Is a Form of Speech

Out of the commonplaces—the daily
walk, evening paper—a voice emerges
from common places, wrapped in sensible
green lightning.

It is in the stock quotes that poetry is
born. Line by pallid line of numbers opens,
an azure vein, a gush of tomorrows.
Metaphor

sharp as an apoplectic tin whistle
forces its improbable way out. Here
Ifheecood, chief of excuses, sews himself a
treetop grin,

bastes it in ambivalent thread, lips a
gash of gold rhetoric. Mailboxes of
meltwater! One must not mind the slow
dyings of spring.

Past the foundry, great Connecticut birds
and a scissor of sky overhead.
All the things of earth are mourning: the weeds,
a widow's teeth.

Rachel Beck
San Francisco, Calif.

**Traveling to Oklahoma for My Grandmother's Funeral,
I Write a Poem about Wallace Stevens**

I

It is early October, and in Hartford
The leaves leave on their orange parkas.
Winter sidles up like a bad salesman in a blustery coat.

Section 14 of Hartford's Cedar Hill Cemetery
Pokes up like stubble on the earth's craggy chin:
The uncut hair of graves.

Twenty-three days from now,
A maple leaf will unzip and head down
To the hard, unhangng world below

And light on the ground about seven feet
Above the darkening body of Wallace Stevens,
Fat man, terrestrial, as invisible as a god.

II

It is early October on United Airlines flight 5481, seat 7C.
I am en route to Oklahoma for my grandmother's funeral,
And all I can think about is Wallace Stevens's death,

The porch of spirits lingering, the grave in Hartford
Where he lay. At this moment, my grandmother lies
On a table in the Southland Funeral Home in Tulsa.

Her blood streams out of her body at an astonishing speed
As though with purpose or direction, like an airplane
Funneling home inside some great blue tube of sky.

Like everything else, we are in transit. We all sail
Toward the port of the dead, land of unknown arrival
And itinerary. Who is it that plans the schedule of ghosts?

III

The priest attending to Stevens
During his final days in the hospital
Swears he made a deathbed conversion to Catholicism,

A claim his daughter denies. I deny
Him nothing. It is cold in Connecticut.
The heavenly palms and bright green wings

Of Florida might as well be in Ceylon or Esthonia.
It is possible that in that dissolving moment
Stevens asked something of the God he believed

Might be a poem or a woman skating. But who
Is to say that God took him seriously?
At what point does the believer become the believed?

IV

The elderly woman next to me
In 7D has been peeking
At this poem for several minutes.

I don't mind
Because the next line is this:
She will die before I do,

As will the man two rows in front
In 5C and his wife in 5D. But then again,
All of us on the plane could get there

In seconds. In the reverse burial that is this sky,
We fall forward into the nothing that is not yet revealed.
We are the dying Stevens; we have no idea what lies ahead.

V

I suddenly realize it is October 2, Stevens's birthday.
In Oklahoma, the red dirt goes on being red—
The dogwoods, the willows, the beige bony wheat stubs,

The riven days of wind, the sky like a drive-in screen,
The sky like an empty page, the sky like an underground sea.
Take me down, I say out loud, in this soft silver coffin.

It's the other world I want right now. But Oklahoma spools on
below.

At this moment, what I need most is to ask my grandmother—
Her entire life a believer—if in that flash of black light,

If, in that final instant, she had the opposite doubts
Of Stevens. If she renounced the supreme fiction, the emptiness
Suddenly so clear, beyond the dividing and indifferent blue.

Dean Rader
San Francisco, Calif.

Reviews

Late Stevens: The Final Fiction.

By B. J. Leggett. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005.

Some readers of Wallace Stevens' entire canon of poetry are prone to register a noticeable alteration in the work composed especially within the last few years of the poet's life and mainly gathered in the concluding section of *The Collected Poems* entitled *The Rock*. Focusing on an important shift in the sensibility or mood in this last work, B. J. Leggett's new book, *Late Stevens: The Final Fiction*, aims to account for this change in terms of what he calls a "master intertext" or "master narrative" (3). He invites us to view this shift coterminously with that "final fiction" flagged in his subtitle.

"Final" (as opposed to "supreme") fiction is a significant ascription here, setting it quite apart from apparently related instances in Stevens' earlier poetry that Leggett is most insistent upon demarcating from the later. For the assumption that "the epistemology of these last poems is continuous with what preceded them" (65) can lead to untold misreadings of *The Rock*, starting early perhaps with James Baird's *The Dome and the Rock: Structure in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (1968), but culminating later with the notorious deconstructionism of J. Hillis Miller in the mid-1980s (and beyond) as we shall see. Very quickly, then, one begins to gather together a variety of synonymic replacements for the final fiction throughout Leggett's study—"independent reality" (6), "meditation" (62), "fantasia" (70), "Omnium" (125), "Being" (142), among others—as a means of possibly correcting one's own misprision of the late Stevens. "Belief" in the theological sense is arguably the least helpful substitution if we recall Stevens' own pronouncement (and several others like it) that "[O]ne's final belief must be in a fiction" (*L* 370). As Leggett will argue, Stevens' final fiction as a species of "supreme imagination" is rather untenable, "since it is neither God nor the imagination as these are normally conceived" (5).

So how are we to understand the final fiction in Stevens' last work? In a concluding chapter in which Leggett presents his most searching ruminations on the subject in response to several texts Stevens composed after the *Collected Poems*, the final fiction is presented to us this way:

It is not the product of a human imagination; rather, it displays the energy and movement of something that has its own existence. . . . [I]t appears to display a will, as if it were pure principle verging on form then consciously "denying itself" the form it approaches, transforming itself merely for the sake of transformation. (129)

Here, Leggett's formulation for the final fiction is triggered by a close inspection of "Reality Is an Activity of the Most August Imagination" and, in his persuasive conclusion, he will pull us forward to his impeccable reading of

Stevens' very last composition, "Of Mere Being," wherein, once again, "one recognizes the existence of pure being [as] a reality independent of the mind or reason" (142). But Leggett's terminal formulations will also pull us back to moments earlier in the study and thus to several equally compelling readings of texts in *The Rock* such as "The Plain Sense of Things." "Like many of Stevens' late poems," Leggett observes in his polemical introduction, "it is an attempt to grant external reality . . . an independent existence, free from [Stevens'] own mind" (21)—"Not Ideas about the Thing But the Thing Itself" as one of Stevens' most famous titles would have it; or, to recur to lines in "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" that could easily stand as a motto for the book in its entirety: "We feel the obscurity of an order, a whole, / A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous / Within its vital boundary, in the mind" (CP 524).

Longtime readers of Leggett himself, of course, will not find the final-fiction thesis presented here especially new. It is a notion that has been fairly close to his broad-ranging meditation on the poet for close to two decades and given its first workout in the concluding chapter of *Wallace Stevens and Poetic Theory: Conceiving the Supreme Fiction*, Leggett's first important intertextual reading of the poet. There, a careful consideration of Henri Focillon's *The Life of Forms in Art* in relation to Stevens' "The Auroras of Autumn" prompted him to speculate that perhaps some external force at back of the poetic imagination in general may have, in that longish postwar ode, sparked "Stevens' attempt to move beyond the individual imagination as the origin and measure of all meaning" (193), as Leggett put it back in 1987. Only slightly updated in *Late Stevens*—now we are given to understand "'Credences of Summer' mark[s] the first extended appearance of Stevens' external consciousness" (133)—the final-fiction thesis is currently pursued with headlong enthusiasm.

What will be new for readers, therefore, is precisely the degree of emphasis accorded this master intertext in Stevens' last poetry by the Distinguished Professor of Humanities at the University of Tennessee writing clearly at the very top of his interpretive powers. Indeed, one becomes rather wistful about as superb a critic as Leggett circumventing his previous (and indispensable) *Early Stevens: The Nietzschean Intertext* (1992), and in his senior years rounding back rather sympathetically on a senior Stevens given initial exposure in Leggett's first book on the poet. "Is there a connection between the speaker's age and his plain sense of things?" (39), he fancifully queries today. The remarkable cogency, clarity, and conviction of *Late Stevens* would appear to make the question rhetorical.

Much of that commanding plain sense will surface in the fourth chapter of the book devoted to Stevens' sometime relationship with the poet and philosopher George Santayana and hence to Leggett's highly suggestive perusal of "To an Old Philosopher in Rome," written in tribute to the Spaniard. Here Leggett's superb skill as an intertextual critic permits us to see, for instance, how the curious binary relation of existence and essence in Santayana's philosophy helps to illuminate the vastness of an infinite fiction (essence) in which the meaning of man (existence) can assume only a finite place. Thus, we have

in Stevens' text: "Rome, and that more merciful Rome / Beyond" by whose relation "Men are part both in the inch and in the mile" (CP 508). At the intersection between the suprahuman and the all-too-human—"On the threshold of heaven" (CP 508), as the text's opening line puts it—Santayana's poetic persona thus becomes the very embodiment of a critical engagement with the final fiction quite like the critic's (and the reader's) own in Stevens' concluding collection of verse.

As such, Santayana becomes something like a grand culminating instance of figures both real and imaginary taken up in a similar way in the two preceding chapters. In the second, the intertextual alignment limned between will and idea in Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophy and, by implication, essence and existence in Santayana's is suggested to Leggett by Stevens' 1951 lecture "A Collect of Philosophy": "Reality, then, is will . . . [and] will is thus far deeper than the intellect" (OP 274). Such an alignment thus allows Leggett to seize upon the two-world dichotomy pervasive throughout *The Rock* and so make plain once again his contention "that the inner world of the self is part of a larger world that resembles the self" (46). Consequently, in the third chapter this last real alignment redounds to a highly imaginative one featuring Penelope, Mr. Homburg, and the Interior Paramour in a trio of related poems. Among them, Leggett forges the fearful symmetry of his intertextual analysis with considerable precision and elegance: "It is not that the human mind—thinking, meditating—is a figure for the process of nature; it is rather that the natural process is the source for the workings of the human mind" (69).

The preceding allusion to Northrop Frye is not accidental. In Frye's great study of William Blake, we may recall the critic's powerful Stevensesian assertion that "Art does not imitate nature, but the order of nature is the foundation of the order of art" (*Fearful Symmetry* 258). It is perhaps on this point that we sense that the final fiction, for better or worse, can also supply the means of separating the superhuman critic from the merely mortal one. In Leggett's fifth chapter, J. Hillis Miller is intended to be exemplary of the latter not only because the general slackness of deconstruction's prodigal indeterminacy that Miller did so much to popularize at the expense of Stevens' late work will fail to account for a good deal of the high refinement of his final fiction. But Miller is also taken to task for allowing the deconstructive ethos (in essays such as "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure" [1976]) to mask his "lack of competency" (99) as an interpreter of texts in face of what Leggett is repeatedly prone to invoke throughout his study as more "correct" readings of Stevens (27, 51, 53, 67, 70, and passim).

For some readers, the dust-up will likely cast a slight pall over late Leggett, since all of the blindness, confusion, distortion, and incoherence by which Miller stands accused would be difficult to avoid as "reality becomes mysterious and appearance becomes unreal" (85) in late Stevens, by Leggett's very own admission. Other readers, however, may be more happily diverted to know that, according to the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1910), it was possible for Stevens to sight the aurora borealis in New Haven, Connecticut, only slightly fewer times in the summer months than in the winter (154, n 12). Rather than in Miller, then, the devil is perhaps more clearly

and characteristically evident in the painstaking and hypnotic detail of an enviable contribution to recent Stevens scholarship.

David Jarraway
University of Ottawa
Canada

Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens.

By Simon Critchley. London and New York: Routledge, 2005.

Things Merely Are is a philosopher's "invitation to read poetry" (2). Simon Critchley, Professor of Philosophy at the New School for Social Research, New York, and at the University of Essex, introduces his analysis of philosophy in the poems of Wallace Stevens with an unabashedly humanist and self-consciously Stevensian defense of the elevating, liberating, and ennobling power of poetry: "Poetry enlarges life" (2), Critchley asserts, albeit that this imaginative enlargement of experience finds its inverse ratio in an ever diminishing readership. Stevens' compliment in his 1951 paper "A Collect of Philosophy" that "the concepts of philosophy are poetic" (*OP* 267) is fulsomely reciprocated by Critchley, who lauds Stevens as "the philosophically most interesting poet to have written in English in the twentieth century" (15).

Stevens had earlier defined philosophy as the official view of being and poetry its unofficial antitype, but in the poetry versus philosophy stakes, Stevens offers us "not a choice / Between, but of" (*CP* 403), and this is his attraction for Simon Critchley. Indeed, where Stevens' own academic engagement with philosophy would prove disappointing (as Critchley remarks, "A Collect of Philosophy" consists of "half-digested lumps" of student textbooks [49]), the poetry offers up a veritable feast. Stevens' poetry "allows us to recast what is arguably the fundamental concern of philosophy, namely the relation between thoughts and things or mind and world"—which is nothing less than "the basic problem of epistemology" (4). Critchley's further claim is that "Stevens recasts this concern in a way that lets us cast it away. Stevens' verse shows us a way of overcoming epistemology" (4).

Tracing the philosophical ancestry of the Stevensian imagination-reality complex, Critchley places Stevens in the lineage of Kant—or, rather, Stevens "begins from Kantian premises read through romantic spectacles" (25). Using "Of Modern Poetry" and "The Man with the Blue Guitar" as exempla, Critchley maps Stevens' poetry onto the transcendental turn in philosophy, the move from *metaphysica specialias* (metaphysics concerned with God) to *metaphysica generalis* (the relation of thought to things, mind to world). In Stevens' poetic redistribution of the Kantian master concepts of mind and world, imagination and reality, the mind creates a reality that yet "retreats before the imagination that shapes and orders it" and thus makes poetry, despite its "therapeutic" (59) enlargement of life, "the experience of failure" (6). This process, it is argued, is at its most compelling in Stevens' late poems.

Commenting as others have done on "the atypical timbre" (63) of these late lyrics, Critchley describes the poems of *The Rock* and the contemporane-

ous lyrics gathered in *Opus Posthumous* as a Beckettian anti-poetry. Liminal between a reality apprehensible only to a mind of winter and its imaginative transfiguration into the credences of summer, these lyrics inhabit the transitional seasons of autumn and, in "Not Ideas about the Thing But the Thing Itself," early spring. Playing Heidegger to Stevens' Hölderlin, Critchley argues that this poetry brings us to the realization that things merely are. This condition of "mereness" induces a mood of calm, an imaginative assuagement of the pressure of reality of an order that Critchley also discovers in the films of Terence Malick, discussed in his extended Afterword. The poetico-philosophical "dwelling" in which Stevens' and Critchley's "being there together is enough" (CP 524) is, at the end of the book, a *ménage à trois*.

Malick is introduced by way of the coda to "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," "The Death of a Soldier." Like the poem to which it offers "a cinematic analogue" (7), Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1998) is about war (the subject of the movie is Guadalcanal). Wary of slipping on the several "hermeneutic banana skins" (98) lying in the path of the philosopher who would comment on Malick's movies, Critchley almost successfully resists the temptations of the biographical fallacy (Malick studied philosophy at Harvard and published a bilingual edition of Heidegger prior to studying at the American Film Institute in Los Angeles). The clear and present danger of translating the language of cinema into a philosophical metalanguage is also noted, playfully; the critic must have respect for the thing itself (in this case, the idiom of film), not ideas about it. The idea Critchley has about *The Thin Red Line* is that the key to the movie is a condition of calm, a *Ruhe* that is divulged by the experience of *Angst* in the Heideggerian sense. To illustrate this, and to bring us back to Stevens, Critchley refers us to the closing shot of *The Thin Red Line* reproduced on the book jacket, a coconut on a beach, presumably fallen from the palm at the end of the mind; bewilderingly, the British edition of the book has a different cover image.

Things Merely Are sustains a profound engagement between philosopher and poet that is consistently remarkable, if occasionally cloying. Critchley's vocabulary is densely and deliberately imbricated with Stevens' throughout, nowhere more so than in the "twenty-one propositions" that constitute the opening chapter and which pay homage to Stevens' propositional "Adagia." If Critchley's aperçus are no less plangent than Stevens' adages, this is because they are lovingly paraphrased from Stevens' poems and essays. As Critchley acknowledges, he has written "in the hope of getting Stevens right by taking him at his word" (61). Critchley does get Stevens right, but at the hazard, perhaps, of taking Stevens too much on his own terms and inscribing himself within a hermeneutic circle, a Stevensian enclosure of hypotheses.

As an unapologetically philosophical intervention into Stevens-studies, *Things Merely Are* is, in the best sense, an eccentric book. More troublingly, Critchley's Stevens is "writing in the wake and complex cross-currents of romanticism" (20)—these are complex cross-currents indeed, if the wake of romanticism is the movement others call modernism. Stevens as the philosophers' man stands at something of a tangent to the dominant literary-critical historicizing of the poets of his generation: in the new modernist studies, for

example, the rehabilitation of T. S. Eliot's poetic reputation is coincident with the relative and temporary, one hopes, demotion of Stevens'. Simon Critchley's immensely suggestive notes toward a philosophical reading of Stevens are played against the prevailing critical tempo.

Lee M. Jenkins
University College Cork
Ireland

Stevens, Williams, Crane and the Motive for Metaphor.

By Robert Rehder. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Robert Rehder dedicates his study of metaphor in Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, and Hart Crane to the memory of one of his teachers, R. P. Blackmur, and Rehder's book is faithful to the announced affiliation: it adheres to and extends Blackmur's critical practice. Like Blackmur, Rehder sees literature as the source of "an irregular metaphysic" with real but partial value in a post-religious age. Avoiding both older and newer forms of academic historicism, he scrutinizes texts with a rigor akin to scientific inquiry but most nearly related to the meticulous observational method of a natural historian such as Jean-Henri Fabre. Empirical and untheoretical, Rehder's commentaries are thick with etymology, definition, and paraphrase; they gloss, but they never gloss over. In keeping with a Williams phrase he admires, Rehder's interpretative procedure is to keep things "close to the nose" (78). The results are illuminating and learned, but (happily) they smell less of the lamp than they do of poetic worlds that arise from and return to the aromas and odors of lived lives, worlds that (both although and because they are made out of words) are ripe with embodied needs and desires. Rehder quotes approvingly Blackmur's maxim "Criticism always has to be done over" (ix). His book obeys the requirement, and it demonstrates the accuracy and utility of his mentor's urgent but modest imperative.

Rehder begins with a preface; its opening sentence, "This is a book about metaphor" (xiv), is typically forthright. Although Rehder is deeply informed about the long history of debate on his subject, his understanding of metaphor is largely Aristotelian: making metaphors is a talent or gift, not something that can be learned; it has more to do with resemblances than identities (so that simile is a special case of metaphor); it "is one of the ways in which we order the world" (xiv). (Additionally, Rehder often connects metaphor's involvements with sameness and difference to the lifelong impact of a child's identification with and separation from its mother, here read not as trauma but as circumstance.) Rehder argues that the study of a poet's ideas about and practice of metaphor offers new perspectives on representations of mental events and of the world, on the poet's relation to objects, and on poetic style. He thinks it can also correct the tendency of period definitions both to assert non-existent unities and to ignore actual similarities among poets of the same era.

The preface locates Stevens, Williams, and Crane in relation to one another: Stevens and Williams were near contemporaries, friends, and correspondents;

Crane was twenty years younger than Stevens and sixteen years younger than Williams; Crane did not know Stevens; he had met Williams but saw little of him; they all read one another's work. The preface also differentiates the poets' approaches to metaphor. Stevens abstracts ideas from things and characters and stories from ideas in an unending metaphorical process that works out temporarily satisfying versions of the interrelationship of the imagination and reality without reaching conclusions about or solutions to the ultimate nature of that relationship. Williams rejects metaphor in his earlier work (in order to achieve the "selfless," "objective" contact with things that conventional metaphors block); in his later work, when he could consider himself as one more "thing" among others, he restores metaphor to his poems. Crane believes in an organic "logic of metaphor" (127) that unifies disparate things in unstated but suggested transcendent third terms and is a myth-making power creating new forms of belief. Finally, the preface unites the three poets, arguing that they all (differently) employ metaphor to respond to the age's replacement of absolutes by radical subjectivity.

My abstract summary makes much of this material sound familiar, even worn or stale, like the things encountered by Stevens' man on the dump. But Rehder's detailed readings almost always refresh standard versions of these poets, their poems, and their poetics. The book's organization is straightforward. Each poet's view of metaphor—including dissonant and imponderable elements within it, many of those elements as telling as more readily comprehensible and systematic ones—is treated in general and then in terms of particular poems. There are two chapters each on Stevens and Crane (Rehder concentrates on Stevens' "Someone Puts a Pineapple Together" and, in a remarkably lucid reading, on the "Atlantis" section of Crane's *The Bridge*). Given Williams' rejection of and return to metaphor, Rehder treats him in three chapters and discusses many more of his poems, among them "The Young Housewife," "Pastoral" ("When I was younger"), "Young Sycamore," "Proletarian Portrait," "Fine Work with Pitch and Copper," "A Sort of Song," "The Descent," "Choral: The Pink Church," "The Problem," and "The Pink Locust." A closing chapter focuses on definitions of metaphor, especially those of Aristotle and Derrida. Its placement and brevity enact Rehder's granting of priority to textual detail rather than preconception or theory; it concludes (in a tacit redirection of the now conventional metaphor-metonymy distinction) that metaphors have an unfinished, ongoing quality in which both particulars and abstractions, similarities and dissimilarities are kept in play. (The book is also characterized by many incisive comparisons between and among its poets—and, often, with T. S. Eliot as well. Perhaps in keeping with Stevens' reticence, the Williams and Crane chapters are more biographical.)

From the perspective of Stevens scholarship, Rehder's survey of Stevens' thinking about metaphor in his prose and in the four "metaphor" poems in *The Collected Poems* is the most thorough and nuanced treatment of those matters we have. His scrupulous, nearly word-by-word close reading of "Someone Puts a Pineapple Together" is superb. His inconclusive conclusions about it give the flavor of Rehder's own sweetly acidic, creative, provisional critical practice as well as of Stevens' kind of metaphor making and of this poem and

its oddly hybrid-sounding fruit: "The sections are as if assembling *toward*. . . . The pineapple is not really together. . . . *Collecting* is not wholeness. Its unity is process. The object is between the world and the imagination . . . , a dynamic, abstract configuration . . . glittering elusively" (36).

Guy Rotella
Northeastern University

The Ground of Our Beseeking: Metaphor and the Poetics of Meditation.
By Peter Sharpe. Selingsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2004.

Peter Sharpe, poet and professor of English at Wagner College, has marshaled an array of philosophical forces to evaluate the relative successes of T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and Theodore Roethke in their poetic search for God. His book asks, "To what extent and in what ultimate forms of feeling, thinking, seeing, believing, and behaving can the lineaments of a feasible life of the spirit still be articulated?" (20). As motto for his project, he adopts the question posed by Stevens, "What, then, is the nature of poetry in a time of disbelief?" (26).

The question is posed in the initial chapter and some leading philosophical voices such as Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur are heard in the second. Sharpe completes his study with separate chapters on Eliot, Stevens, and Roethke. Lurking in the background is Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose influence, though repudiated by Stevens in the late poem "Looking Across the Fields and Watching the Birds Fly," is claimed to be pervasive.

Sharpe admits his undeclared hero is Stevens. It is understandable. Roethke's oeuvre revolves around and benefits from the towering example of the other two. Fifty years after the death of Stevens and forty after the death of Eliot, Stevens has worn far better.

In his later years, when he had assumed an almost archbishop-of-Canterbury persona, Eliot could comfortably re-invoke in his poetry the traditional Christian vocabulary of Incarnation and Redemption. Stevens, with the total consistency of his never-ending meditation, could not. In the majestic "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," the lion of Juda of the Old Testament is reduced to the dimensions of a cat, and Juda itself becomes New Haven because, as Stevens comments, "The phrase grows weak" (CP 473). In the early poems "The Bird with the Coppery Keen Claws" and "Sunday Morning," the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, symbolized by a dove, becomes a parakeet and a simple pigeon, respectively. It is "a fresh spiritual" that Stevens seeks, "God in the object itself" (CP 474-75).

In his second chapter, in which the philosophical issues are explored, Sharpe demonstrates the difficulty of invoking the technical vocabulary of philosophy and conjoining it in an enlightening way with the well-wrought words written out of religious desire by the poets. We tend to get lost in the words. What Sharpe in this complicated way seems to be saying is that some modern philosophers and these poets are at one in seeking a more adequate religious

language while at the same time recognizing the human loss that comes from a total rejection of the tradition.

Sharpe's study comes into true focus in its discussion in Chapter Four, "The Vernacular of Light," of Stevens' "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," the example par excellence of religious meditation. He asks us, correctly, to recognize that Stevens approaches the supreme fiction in a way that is loose-ended and improvisatory. Truth, perhaps, depends on "a walk around a lake" (CP 386). Meditation, therefore, is not dialectical analysis but a sudden awakening that is fortuitous and unpremeditated: it is a moment of receptivity and giftedness, of revelation. The aim is not to impose but to discover.

Sharpe goes too far, however, when he states, "It is not Nietzsche's intent, any more than that of Stevens, to eradicate the Apollonian; it is rather that reason, as illusion, covers up the greater wisdom of the Dionysian" (202). Romanticism as a movement was certainly a reaction against the arrogant claims of reason during the Enlightenment. Stevens is a late adherent of this tendency, but he also sees its limitations. Stevens famously makes the declaration that poetry "must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully" (CP 350); the operative word here is "Almost."

Sharpe is not exact when he asserts that "in Stevens's 'Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,' the religious (or spiritual) impulse is largely aestheticized, or displaced; the source or ground of metaphor is relocated in the fictive constructs of the imagination" (24). I would say, rather, that the source or ground is being freshly imagined. That fresh imagining, the poet's style, is precisely the religious element. The theologian Paul Tillich in this regard made the distinction between religious style and religious subject matter. A painting or a poem, according to Tillich in his book *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper, 1958), could have a religious subject and not be religious at all, such as a Renaissance Madonna, the model being the paramour of the painter, realistically portrayed. Religious style, on the other hand, demonstrates the artist's "ultimate concern" (4). Picasso's painting of the horror of the Spanish civil war, *Guernica*, while not religious in subject, is truly religious as a manifestation of the artist's prophetic protest against the first mass bombing of human beings in history. This is why Stevens could say with total accuracy, "It is the belief and not the god that counts" (OP 188). Stevens similarly said it was the poet's task to provide the satisfactions of belief in his own style.

The religious question in the end is not so much in how the encounter with God is described, "the fictional coverings," so to speak, but rather in the sources of that fervent engagement, the mystery that lies behind the human heart. It may seem a disservice to religion when Sharpe concludes in the chapter on Stevens, "Not God, but life, more life, a larger, richer, more satisfying life, is, in the last analysis, the end of religion" (285), but it is not. Did not the church fathers centuries ago declare, "Gloria Dei, vivens homo" ("The Glory of God is the human person fully alive" [*Adversus Haereses* III 202-03])?

Charles M. Murphy S. T. D.
Holy Martyrs of North America
Falmouth, Maine

The End of the Mind: The Edge of the Intelligible in Hardy, Stevens, Larkin, Plath, and Glück.

By De Sales Harrison. New York and London: Routledge, 2005.

De Sales Harrison's *The End of the Mind: The Edge of the Intelligible in Hardy, Stevens, Larkin, Plath, and Glück* investigates the final constructions of poets that test the limits of intelligibility. This objective is hard to define, since by the definition of his project, Harrison is toying with negating intelligibility. The book's introduction outlines the scholarly focus on poetry that "is not merely delayed or deferred, as in the case of difficulty, but arrested, impeded, obscured, damaged, or destroyed" (1). When, after Hardy, he gets to Stevens in chapter two, it is not *Harmonium* but the poet's late work of bare clarity that is examined. The late poetry is arresting.

In seeking the "outer limits of possibility" (65), these poets attempt to speak the unspeakable. Harrison's analysis in each chapter is provocative, thorough, and worthwhile. The book is valuable for scholars of any of these poets. For this journal, however, I will focus on Stevens. Harrison carefully positions himself as neither a poststructuralist adhering to linguistic primacy nor a pragmatist of secular experience. Instead, Harrison investigates the unintelligible and unavoidable Beyond to which Stevens' late poems turn. The irony is that Harrison says that Stevens speaks of this "inanimate savoir" non-transcendentally. Such irony might be built into the poetry itself. That is the question. Harrison looks at the nonhuman region of native earth as it gathers force in the last ten years of Stevens' poetry, which picks up even greater steam in the posthumously published poems. This poetry of the earth, that inhuman other, is found in the deceptions of "No Possum, No Sop, No Taters" and "World Without Peculiarity," poems that strip the poet of harmonious power to locate "the poverty of dirt" (CP 453).

These deceptions of "entropic desolation" (74) make room for the external world to flood poems with local objects. Harrison cites "The Man on the Dump" as an early indication of this late emphasis, stating that the poem contains an arbitrary list of "profuse possibilities" (75). My question is: can the man on the dump be entropically diminished while portentously signaling "*aptest eve*," "*Invisible priest*," and "*stanza my stone*" (CP 203)? I do not think so. Harrison's interpretation cites Harold Bloom here, as well as W. B. Yeats and Robert Lowell, to exhibit the poem's maximum potentiality. Yet, because "The the" remains indefinite, Harrison excludes human testimony as part of the poem.

I struggle with Harrison's complicity in allowing Stevens to have it both ways: ascetic and plentiful. Of "Montrachet-le-Jardin," Harrison writes: "Stevens dedicates himself to finding a means not of *describing* or *affirming* imagelessness, but of enacting or embodying it" (77). This poem lets ebb "yesterday's devotions" (CP 264) into the more central being of the poet, yet ends with another *image* of the leaping cat. Perhaps the edge of the intelligible is Stevens' trope of the rock, which speaks of the buried life that is always covered with leaves, those fluctuating images, such as the leaping cat in "Montrachet-le-Jardin."

Harrison's quest for the end of the mind leads to the trope of the "dominant blank" (*CP* 477) in the late poems. "The Sail of Ulysses," as main example, includes "The self as sibyl, whose diamond, / Whose chiefest embracing of all wealth / Is poverty" (*OP* 130). This pit of desire has had countless rhetorical quenchings: what is beyond that? Birdsong seems an oxymoronic answer, though in keeping with Stevens' poetry, Harrison employs "The Dove in Spring" as an illustration of the final desire found outside of the poet.

Earlier in the chapter, Harrison alluded to Yeats's ability to reach a permanent externality through art or history. Stevens' spirit finds enduring sustenance in "Vacancy in the Park" and "Not Ideas about the Thing But the Thing Itself," where phenomena are said to be external to intelligibility. These poems, along with "The Course of a Particular" and "Of Mere Being," purportedly exist "*beyond* human meaning and feeling, beyond a world where artifice serves any human purpose" (101)—without Yeats's artifice but with Yeats's suspension of time; ongoing, though not everlasting, like Keats's "slow time."

Although I agree that Stevens convincingly combines movement and fixity in these slow suspensions, I question Harrison's belief "*in the complete absence of a beholder*" (101) and "in the absence of any term of human intelligibility whatsoever" (102). In "Of Mere Being," do we not find "The palm at the end of the mind" (*OP* 141)? Harrison correctly states that, unlike Yeats's, Stevens' "artifice of eternity" is "radically without context" (101). Yet, is it not an image that the poetic mind willfully catapults into space? Stevens postulates a posthumous world but this absence of human involvement had to be imagined, as the agency of the poem indicates. Harrison may take his argument a step too far. To me, Stevens' late work remains capaciously human because the poem's speakers can so fully imagine nonhuman geocentric power. Harrison gets it right, however, when he observes that the late poems register "an impersonal vitality . . . [that] is ultimately the manifestation of the world's inalienable strength" (102).

This book's chapter on Stevens makes a timely contribution to the ongoing discussion of Stevens' late poetry. One edge of the mind is enough for this review; I urge readers of Hardy, Larkin, Plath, and Glück to see what is found there.

Angus Cleghorn
Seneca College and Trent University
Ontario, Canada

Wallace Stevens and the Apocalyptic Mode.

By Malcolm Woodland. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005.

Malcolm Woodland, in his first three chapters, presents a useful survey of the history of the apocalyptic mode in literature, with many citations of literary critics and theological sources, especially the Bible, that are useful in taking account of the recurrent fiction of apocalypse. His definition of this mode is broad: a search for power in language, especially in the face of vast historic

changes such as the Great Depression and World War II. Wallace Stevens' search for power in language led him to appropriate the vocabulary of religion throughout his career, and so his poetry might suggest an interest in apocalypse; however, with an innate caution that led him to qualify his assertions, repeatedly and compulsively, Stevens is often considered antiapocalyptic. Woodland regards him as both apocalyptic and antiapocalyptic at the same time.

Woodland parallels these two terms with modernism and postmodernism as well as with several "masculinities." He depicts Stevens' "creative personality" and shows it in a struggle with "a world situation that [could] cause a radical break with or within imaginative history or at least within Stevens's own creative career" (71). This interior battle made vivid becomes one of the central devices of the book. Reading Stevens, Woodland finds it "impossible to ignore the marks in his oeuvre of a desire for the possibility of stability, and above all for the possibility of a certain kind of poetic power descended from a tradition of 'truth,' a tradition that is embodied nowhere more forcefully than in prophetic and apocalyptic language" (xiii).

Woodland's observations of Stevens' "doubled" position with respect to apocalypse require some version of the word "apocalypse" or its opposite, on the average, four times per page, a verbal presence that becomes intrusive. Woodland's purpose "is neither to claim that all of Stevens's reinscriptions of apocalyptic discourse are either straightforwardly apocalyptic, as critics such as Bloom, Carroll, Huston, and others have suggested, or straightforwardly antiapocalyptic, as Longenbach and Cook maintain; nor is it to assert even that Stevens is successively apocalyptic and then antiapocalyptic." Rather, Woodland wishes "to explore the possibility that Stevens's involvement with apocalyptic language is always simultaneously apocalyptic and antiapocalyptic, that his apocalyptic rhetoric is always the mark of a doubled and radically ambiguous desire, the site of an irresolvable tension in his work" (6).

This tension is certainly present in "Credences of Summer," the subject of Woodland's long fourth chapter. "'Credences' may lead us to ask whether Stevens's wartime resistance to apocalypse is a struggle against a tendency within himself, a struggle with his own apocalyptic desires and prophetic ambitions; the presence of both apocalyptic and antiapocalyptic rhetorics in 'Credences of Summer' may be a continuation of this *internal* struggle" (103). This poem combines two modes, and "It seems particularly difficult to decide whether 'Credences' is a predominantly pastoral poem with apocalyptic modulations, or an apocalyptic poem with pastoral modulations" (112). Woodland does not answer this question; instead he demonstrates "why the decision remains so difficult to make" (112). The deft demonstration of critical balance in Chapter 4, "The Refuge That the End Creates," characterizes this book as a whole; Woodland frequently points out the value of critical insights with which he does not agree. However, an ordinary person in New Haven might ask if the clear tension between "eternal foliage" and "change still possible" (*CP* 373) might not be expressed without the word *apocalypse*.

"The Auroras of Autumn," the subject of Woodland's Chapter 5, can be read as apocalypse with elements of elegy, but Woodland argues, first, that

“Stevens’s poem is not an elegy that turns into an apocalypse but rather a topographical poem (as Helen Vendler suggests) featuring frequent apocalyptic modulations which are also already elegiac in mode; and, second, that this transformation of apocalypse leads to a self-elegiac sequence in cantos ii–iv that further rewrites the relationship between elegiac and apocalyptic modulations” (139). Thus this technical conflict is judiciously settled. However, one moment in this chapter seems emblematic of a shortcoming in Woodland’s critical method. He cites “The rendezvous, when she came alone, / By her coming became a freedom of the two, / An isolation which only the two could share” (CP 419), and then comments:

This freedom, perhaps, is the freedom of what [Alice] Jardine calls a “movement into alterity,” of the movement outside the patriarchal, visionary discourse of apocalypse and toward a vision of an earth that need not be subject to eschatological judgment or apocalyptically redeemed, since it is already innocent. This movement constitutes the poem’s most complete undoing of canto vii’s scene of eschatological judgment, and marks its its greatest distance from the discourse represented by canto iv’s father, its greatest remove from a modernist dispensation. (159)

Harold Bloom’s reading of this passage seems more to the point; he compares this passage to a similar passage in *The Rock*: “The meeting at noon at the edge of the field seems like / An invention, an embrace between one desperate clod / And another” (CP 525). Bloom believes the two passages “refer to the same moment in Stevens’ courtship of his wife” (*Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* 278). If Bloom is right, the meeting happened in Philadelphia on February 20, 1909, and Stevens’ preparation for this unchaperoned meeting (Stevens coming down from New York, Elsie coming over from Reading) had been detailed, meticulous, and rather tense as revealed in letters Stevens wrote to Elsie but that Holly Stevens did not include in her edition of her father’s letters. (This series of letters can be found in my edition of *The Contemplated Spouse: The Letters of Wallace Stevens to Elsie*, forthcoming in 2006 from the University of South Carolina Press.)

Woodland’s reading of this passage is solidly supported by the meticulous work he has done, but it is part of a project of mapping or charting (“figuring” is his most common metaphor for this representation) that makes one think of the difference between a landscape seen most of one’s life from the roads through it—roads being those abstractions that make passage most expeditious—and the same landscape seen from a small plane that shows how much of the landscape is not near a road at all. Poets, often in flight, focus on details that are represented on no one else’s map, even one as rationally, persuasively, and clearly drawn as Woodland’s. As early as “The Comedian as the Letter C,” Stevens indicated such an idiosyncratic focus in his alter ego, Crispin: “Preferring text to gloss, he humbly served / Grotesque apprenticeship to chance event, / A clown, perhaps, but an aspiring clown” (CP 39).

Woodland’s final chapter presents an analysis of Jorie Graham’s *The Errancy*, an analysis that emphasizes her sense of apocalypse as it was influ-

enced by Stevens' poetry. The relationship between Stevens' and Graham's poetry seems strangely symbiotic. Woodland's "Afterword" briefly looks at the rather passive responses to apocalypse by two more poets deeply indebted to Stevens, Mark Strand and John Ashbery.

Woodland ends his book hoping that it has offered "a preliminary mapping of a hitherto neglected aspect of the history of the End—namely, its persistence in the attempts of writers at different points in the last century to conceptualize, validate, sustain and defend the aesthetic dispensations that shape their work" (217). There can be little doubt that this statement is generally true, but one could debate the practical utility of the concept of apocalypse in reading Stevens' poetry. Stevens seems happy with endless repetition, with "an old chaos of the sun, / Or old dependency of day and night" (*CP* 70), repeating as he does in "Idiom of the Hero," phrases such as "not be ended," "Not ended, never and never ended" (*CP* 200–01), with finding, as he does in the final line of his *Collected Poems*, in the "scrawny cry" of a bird "at daylight or before," something "like / A new knowledge of reality" (*CP* 534), or imagining "mere being" as "a gold-feathered bird" in "the palm at the end of the mind," "on the edge of space" (*OP* 141).

J. Donald Blount
University of South Carolina, Aiken

News and Comments

Thanks go to Russ MacKechnie and Bill Ford for paying for the rights for the cover photograph. Although the photo was taken by the Hartford *Courant* on the occasion of WS's receiving an honorary degree from Wesleyan on June 15, 1947, it was not published until March 28, 1950, when it accompanied a front-page article on WS's winning the 1949 Bollingen Poetry Prize: "Wallace Stevens, Hartford Poet, Awarded \$1000 Prize For Contributions To Poetry." Part of the article reads: "Reached at his home at Westerly Terrace, Mr. Stevens declined an interview. He had nothing to say, 'except hurry.'"

* * *

WS's half-century legacy was honored this summer by an international, two-and-a-half day conference, "Fifty Years On: Wallace Stevens in Europe," hosted by the Rothermere American Institute, University of Oxford, England (August 25–27). Charles Altieri was keynote speaker and there were core contributions from George Lensing, Glen MacLeod, Irene Ramalho Santos, Michael Schmidt, Robert Rehder, Massimo Bacigalupo, Angus Cleghorn, and Krzysztof Ziarek, as well as a presentation of her own work by Dutch artist Helga Kos. A roundtable discussion of "Esthétique du Mal," chaired by Beverly Maeder with commentary from Milton Bates, Gregory Dowling, and others, was complemented by specialist panels on WS's French influences and the poet's relationship with British verse. The co-organizers, Bart Eeckhout and Edward Ragg, were delighted with the range of presentations—including many younger, international voices—and are indebted to the RAI for its sponsorship and hospitality.

* * *

The 10th Annual Wallace Stevens Birthday Bash, organized by the Hartford Friends and Enemies of WS, took place at the Hartford Public Library on October 1. The featured guest was John Taggart, who spoke on "Unveiling/Marianne Moore—and Wallace Stevens." Taggart's recent book, *Pastorelles*, includes a poem inspired by WS's former Hartford home at 118 Westerly Terrace.

* * *

Robert Hass was the honored poet at the 42nd Annual Wallace Stevens Program at UConn, Storrs, where he read on April 25 and then again on April 26 at the Charter Oak Cultural Center in Hartford.

* * *

"The Work of Wallace Stevens" was presented by dramatic reader Petter Juel-Larsen, accompanied by flutist Rebecca Floyd and guitarist Mark Davis, at the Hartford Public Library's Poetry Central on April 24.

* * *

The 8th Annual Wallace Stevens Memorial Poetry Reading, with Ravi Shankar and Ginny Connors, took place in Elizabeth Park on June 18.

* * *

Noted WS scholar B. J. Leggett has published a novel, *Playing Out the String*. About a professor of film who is accused of a shameful act that could cost him his job, the book, with a subtext of movie references, is a suspenseful parody of the mystery novel. "It's a real page-turner," says John N. Serio, who enjoyed it immensely. Released in 2004, it is published by Livingston Press and is available at finer bookstores everywhere (*viz.*, <www.Amazon.com>).

* * *

From Italy, Massimo Bacigalupo reports that on April 2, during the last hours of the life of Pope John Paul II, Gabriella Caramore opened her radio program by reading WS's "The Sick Man" (from Bacigalupo's *Il mondo come meditazione*), commenting that this "wonderful poem" was the proper way to approach the theme of a man saying farewell to life.

* * *

Theater artist Laylage Courie performed *Like Decorations in a Cemetery*, a 75-minute solo "chamber work for voice and debris," at the West End Theatre in New York, September 24–26. As part of the Artists of Tomorrow festival in Manhattan, Courie recited 46 of the 50 stanzas of Stevens' "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," mixing song and speech at a tea party at a tabletop grave.

* * *

Amsterdam artist Helga Kos has published in a limited edition of 288 copies a volume of hand-printed graphics entitled *Ode to the Colossal Sun*, inspired by the 1972 Ned Rorem musical composition *Last Poems of Wallace Stevens*. Kos's edition received the award for the Best Dutch Book Design of 2003. For more information and images from the book see <www.arttrack.nl/HelgaKos>.

* * *

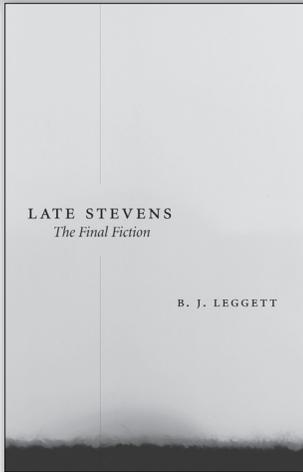
Stephen Matterson reports that the British horse-racing paper *The Racing Post* included in its May 28 issue an ad for the Goodwood racecourse's evening meetings in June a quotation from WS: "The summer night is like a perfection of thought." What a way to get people to the track!

* * *

On September 16, Stanley Burnshaw died at his home on Martha's Vineyard. He was 99. John N. Serio recalls an anecdote Burnshaw told him in 1989. When the editor of *The New Caravan*, Alfred Kreyborg, received WS's poem "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue," he called Burnshaw and said, "Stanley, you've been made famous." "Why?" asked Burnshaw. "Because Wallace Stevens has just written a poem about you." "Is it any good?" asked Burnshaw. "I don't know," replied the editor. "I don't understand it." "Are you going to publish it?" asked Burnshaw. "Of course," said Kreyborg. "It's by Wallace Stevens."

Sara S. Hodson
The Huntington Library

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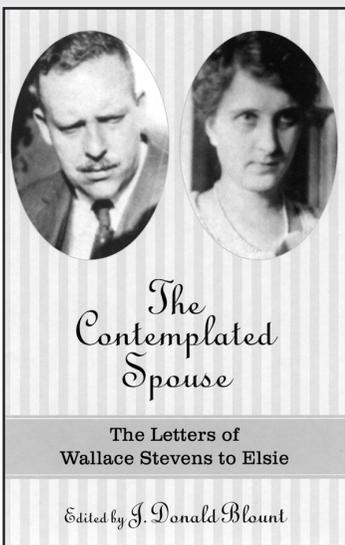
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The Letters of Wallace Stevens to Elsie

Edited by J. Donald Blount

The Contemplated Spouse gathers in a single volume the 272 extant letters written by Wallace Stevens to the woman with whom he shared his life, Elsie Viola Kachel. Written over the span of twenty-five years, the correspondence reflects Elsie’s evolving relationship with Stevens, initially as his dear friend, then as his fiancée, and later as his wife. Taken collectively, these personal letters from one of America’s most important poets reveal aspects of Stevens’s personality that his poetry discloses more obliquely. Most significant, they demonstrate Stevens’s devotion to his wife through years of an uneven partnership.

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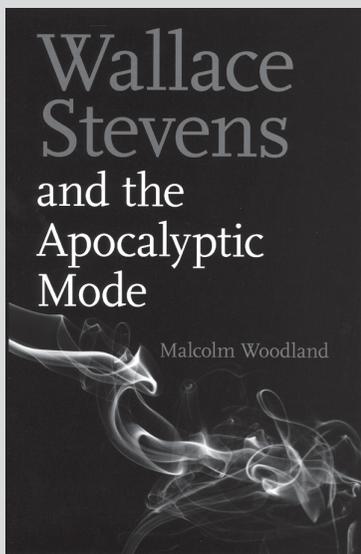
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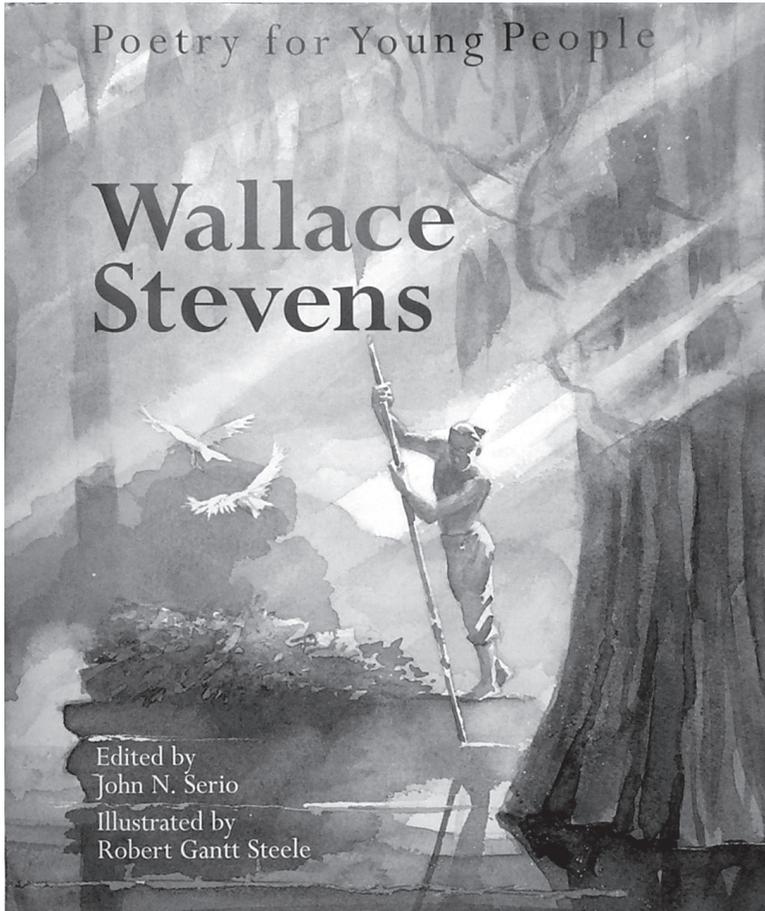
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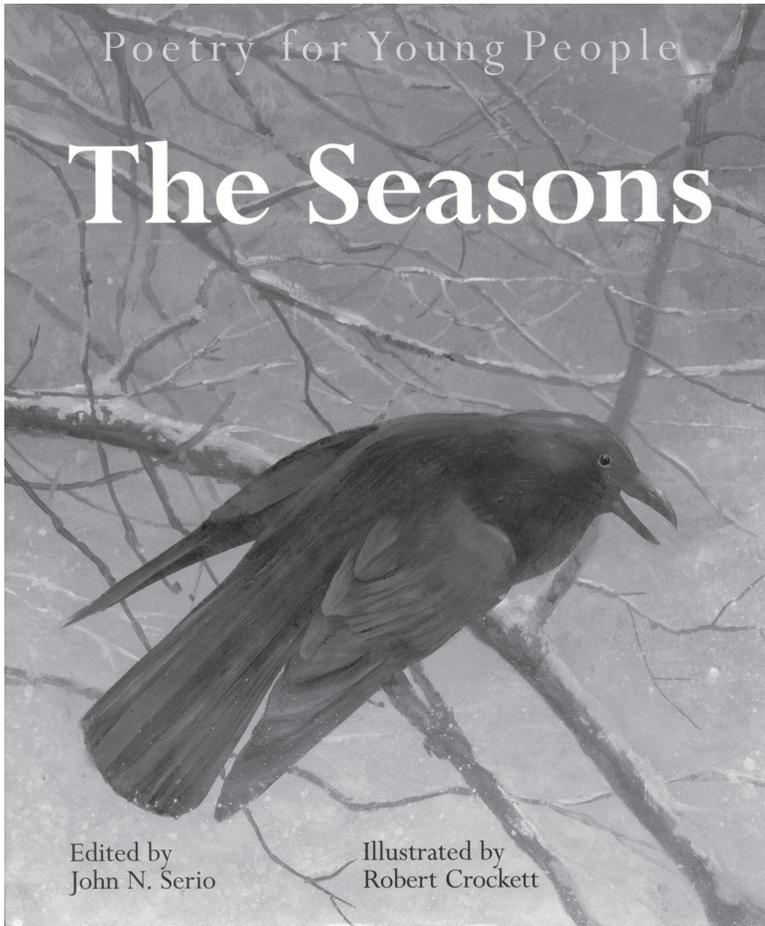
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