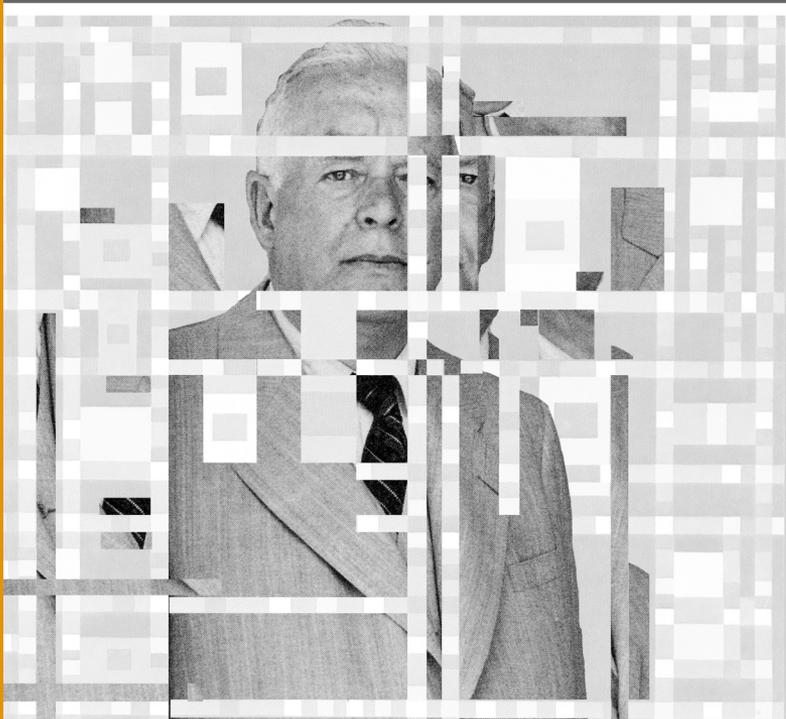


The Wallace Stevens Journal

The Rothermere American Institute hosts
Fifty Years On: Wallace Stevens in Europe
25th-27th August 2005



Wallace Stevens and British Literature

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Wallace Stevens and British Literature
Edited by Bart Eeckhout and Edward Ragg

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The Wallace Stevens Journal

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Introduction

BART EECKHOUT AND EDWARD RAGG

THE MAJORITY OF THE PAPERS assembled for this special issue are based on presentations delivered at a conference we organized on August 25–27, 2005, at the Rothermere American Institute, University of Oxford (U.K.). *Fifty Years On: Wallace Stevens in Europe* was a two-and-a-half day event in which, for the first time on British soil, an international group of scholars, editors, poets, and other aficionados gathered to discuss Wallace Stevens' legacy in light of the poet's contact with European arts, culture, and letters. To some extent, the conference continued the dialogues of two 2004 gatherings: *Celebrating Wallace Stevens: The Poet of Poets in Connecticut* (most recently captured in the Fall 2004 and Spring 2005 issues of this journal) and Josh Cohen's symposium-style event hosted by the University of London in July 2004. But the *Wallace Stevens in Europe* conference broke fresh ground both through its focus on specifically European and transatlantic themes and in the assembly of new, international voices exactly fifty years since the poet's death.

So diverse and promising were those voices that we are grateful for a number of opportunities to publish the proceedings. The Mondrian-inspired poster design reproduced on the cover (which we owe to the excellent graphic work of Tom King) will remind readers that the conference as a whole cast its net considerably wider than what we are presenting here. The current special issue is devoted exclusively to one aspect dealt with at the conference: Stevens' relations with British literature, from Shakespeare and the romantics to the Anglo-American poetry of the poet's own age and after. Some of the papers collected here continue the informal exchange started at the conference. They are in the spirit of introductory, informative notes or brief personal reflections and have not been beefed up into full-fledged essays. We hope these contributions will point readers to possibly unfamiliar contexts for reading and reconsidering Stevens' work. Other papers involve in-depth close reading of Stevens and other authors in tandem. In all cases, we are happy to present fresh debate of this particular area, which will continue to inform the complex question of Stevens' transatlantic identity.

In addition, we are pleased to report that a handful of other contributions to the conference, whose focus is not principally British, will appear

simultaneously on the other side of the Atlantic, in *PN Review*, edited by Michael Schmidt. Ultimately, it is our intention to collect a volume of essays, provisionally entitled *Europe on the Table: Wallace Stevens Across the Atlantic*, which will consolidate the many fine contributions of the Oxford conference together with articles from other prominent Stevensians who have addressed the poet's lifelong imaginative traveling elsewhere. In other words, what we present here is a snapshot of a single section of papers linked by a specific theme—one we hope will be revisited in the context of a larger collaboration.

We would like to thank all those who made the Oxford conference possible. We are especially grateful to the Rothermere American Institute for its substantial sponsorship and for hosting the event as a whole (special thanks are due to RAI Director Paul Giles and the Institute's Assistant Directors). We would also like to acknowledge the Faculty of English, University of Oxford, and the U.S. Embassy in London for their financial support. Personal thanks are extended to Gilles Mourier, who graciously dedicated his French translation of "Repetitions of a Young Captain" to the conference and gave us the scoop of printing it for the first time in the conference program. Then there are those who contributed to the event as speakers and chairs. We were delighted to bring together leading North American scholars (Charles Altieri, George Lensing, Milton Bates, Glen MacLeod, Angus Cleghorn, Krzysztof Ziarek, Diane Middlebrook, Lisa Goldfarb) with influential writers on Stevens in Europe (Massimo Bacigalupo, Robert Rehder, Irene Ramalho Santos, Beverly Maeder). These established voices were joined by promising newcomers (David Haglund, Edward Clarke, Darlene Bird, Stefan Holander, Martin Dyar, Tim Morris) as well as contributors who have considerable experience in the area of poetry specifically or in other arts (editor and publisher Michael Schmidt; poets Matthew Welton, Gareth Reeves, and William Davis; novelist Gregory Dowling; artist Helga Kos). Finally, we would like to thank John Serio for his support throughout this project, Eleanor Cook for acting as a referee, and a number of other Stevens scholars and admirers for their early interest (especially Frank Kermode, James Longenbach, Alan Filreis, Simon Critchley, B. J. Leggett, Lee Jenkins, and Klaus Martens).

Inevitably, we are unable to acknowledge all those who either made the Oxford event possible or who have contributed to the publication of these partial proceedings. But it is our hope that the study of Stevens' work in the next fifty years since the poet's death will consolidate some of the international flavor and cross-generational enthusiasm encountered at the Oxford conference. We hope this special issue replicates that enthusiasm and provides new insights into Stevens' relations with and effects on British literature.

University of Antwerp, Belgium
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Pragmatic Abstraction vs. Metaphor: Stevens' "The Pure Good of Theory" and *Macbeth*

EDWARD RAGG

INTRODUCTION

THE PURE GOOD OF THEORY" was published in Spring 1945 as part of a group entitled "New Poems" in a *Voices* special issue devoted to Wallace Stevens' work.¹ The new poems appeared alongside selections from Stevens' earlier poetry: from *Harmonium*, *Ideas of Order*, *The Man with the Blue Guitar & Other Poems*, and *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*. Intended to sketch Stevens' development, the most recent poems were presumably submitted to represent the poet's new work of early 1945. What distinguishes "The Pure Good of Theory" from other 1945 Stevens poems, however, is the confidence with which the poet forges a maturing abstract aesthetic. The poem has none of the retrospective strain that characterizes "Paisant Chronicle" (which also appeared in the *Voices* issue)—and, despite its title's emphasis on "theory," is not as eager as "Description Without Place" (also 1945) to foreground an aesthetic concept or subject. Unlike "Paisant Chronicle" and "Description Without Place," "The Pure Good of Theory" also resists self-consciously referring to Stevens' early 1940s poetry. It has no interest, for example, as these other poems have, in questioning the place of that dated figure "major man" (see *CPP* 293).² In 1946, the poet would advertise his desire to discover, as one title quips, "A Completely New Set of Objects." But in the Spring of 1945 Stevens was already experimenting, if not with new themes, then with an emergent aesthetic—one that had absorbed abstraction rather than, as in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," one that announced the significance of "the abstract" in Stevens' work (see *CPP* 329 ff.).

"The Pure Good of Theory" also transforms objects of Stevens' early 1940s fascination—"commonplace" words that assume a special resonance in the 1940s verse: "sound," "distance," "speech," "music," "beyond"—into tokens that become part of the texture and theatrical density of the poem.³ This breaks new ground in Stevens' work. The poet finds he no longer requires the master vocabulary of "Notes" through which to project the advantages of an abstract aesthetic. The "commonplace" words from the post-1942 verse do not, then, become terms in a new controlling idiom.

They take on a subtler function in a poetry suspicious of domineering or “literary” rubrics. Where in “Notes” Stevensian terms achieve a metaphysical or ontological imperative, “The Pure Good of Theory” questions privileging any one vocabulary, however abstract. The poem even queries “the desire to believe in a metaphor” (CPP 291). Stevens enters a new space in his work where imagining an abstract “poetry” enables the poet to scrutinize the workings of metaphor itself. As I will argue, “The Pure Good of Theory” testifies to the pragmatic benefits of an abstract aesthetic that Stevens fully realizes only in the last decade of his career.

In what follows, I will show this pragmatic aesthetic at work, arguing that “The Pure Good of Theory” pivots on a battle between abstraction and metaphor—a contest informed by deft allusion to Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. I will relate this tension to the poetic maneuvers of Stevens’ later career and stress the human emphasis that informs Stevensian abstraction. “The Pure Good of Theory” eventually reconciles metaphor to abstraction, a strategy that rescues Stevens from conceiving an inhumanly abstracted verse. In substantiating these arguments, I will touch on debates surrounding the nature of metaphor and also explain the relationship that exists between creating metaphors and thinking abstractly. The following readings are subdivided to correspond with the poem’s own sections.

I

The first section of “The Pure Good of Theory,” “*All the Preludes to Felicity*,” plays with various metaphors for time. A “prelude” is literally that which comes before “play” (from *ludere*, “to play”). It can be a musical or literary introduction, specifically “the introductory part of a poem” (OED).⁴ What the poem introduces is the human mind’s tendency to think in metaphors and to call on metaphor as a form of protection from time itself:

It is time that beats in the breast and it is time
That batters against the mind, silent and proud,
The mind that knows it is destroyed by time.

Time is a horse that runs in the heart, a horse
Without a rider on a road at night.
The mind sits listening and hears it pass.

It is someone walking rapidly in the street.
The reader by the window has finished his book
And tells the hour by the lateness of the sounds.
(CPP 289)

Because the mind “knows it is destroyed by time,” Stevens implies that metaphor (“Time is a horse”) creates the self-protective illusion that the perceptive mind can conquer or at least be reconciled to time: “The mind sits

listening and hears it pass." Likewise, where time becomes "someone walking rapidly in the street," the metaphor enables Stevens' "reader" to appreciate "the lateness of the sounds." What "*All the Preludes to Felicity*" focuses on is the ameliorating effect of metaphor. "Felicity" is not only a state of happiness or "thing causing happiness." It denotes a "happy faculty of expression" or "well-chosen phrase" (*OED*). Even if "time" is "a horse / Without a rider on a road at night"—an image connoting unruly determination—the mind conceives of time's progress in terms of metaphor because felicitous expressions are palliative. The human mind cannot be cured of the realization that it will be destroyed by time. But its ability to conceive of time in metaphor diverts agency therapeutically back to the mind itself, enabling an intellectual resilience against what the heart senses and fears.

In the close of the poem's first section, however, palliative metaphor is abandoned in favor of abstract conception. A "capable being" is simultaneously proposed and created as a figure more capable than metaphor for protecting the mind against "the battering" of time:

Even breathing is the beating of time, in kind:
A retardation of its battering,
A horse grotesquely taut, a walker like

A shadow in mid-earth . . . If we propose
A large-sculptured, platonic person, free from time,
And imagine for him the speech he cannot speak,

A form, then, protected from the battering, may
Mature: A capable being may replace
Dark horse and walker walking rapidly. (*CPP* 290)

Stevens' metaphors—the "horse grotesquely taut," the ephemeral "walker like / A shadow in mid-earth"—are themselves suspended in elliptical dots that imply the limited function of metaphor. In other words, the horse remains "taut" and the walker remains as insubstantial as a "shadow" because the mind realizes metaphors cannot themselves suspend or ward off the "battering" of time. The "platonic person" the poem proffers as a substitute is abstract. He is impossibly "free from time" but constitutes a more useful preserve for the imaginative mind. Note how agency is given to the "we" who propose the figure, who must "imagine for him the speech he cannot speak." Rather than accept traditional metaphors for time, "The Pure Good of Theory" reinvests the mind with the power of abstract creation. This "capable being" may "replace / Dark horse and walker walking rapidly" both on the level of replacing these figures in the poem itself and on the abstract scale of withstanding the effect of time's progress.

Nevertheless, "*All the Preludes to Felicity*" is true to the playfulness of its own title. The novel felicity of replacing metaphor with an abstract

“capable being” is itself playfully scrutinized. The desire to conceive by metaphor proves too strong. Time becomes a comical Chronos (as in “Old Father Time” or Death as a “hooded enemy”) who, with beguiling magic, reinstates metaphor as the mind’s natural point of reference:

Felicity, ah! Time is the hooded enemy,
The inimical music, the enchantered space
In which the enchanted preludes have their place.
(*CPP* 290)

Stevens’ tone is tongue-in-cheek. Unusual for this period is the rhyming couplet, reminiscent of a closing Shakespearean scene featuring a Puck or Ariel. Three metaphors—“hooded enemy,” “inimical music,” “enchantered space”—affirm the centrality of metaphor in conceiving time. The stanza also features the poem’s overall taste for paronomasia—for example, the similarity in sound and appearance between “enchantered” and “enchantered”—established in the first stanza with “time” and “mind,” “beats” and “breast.” Such a trope (most revealingly used in section III with “metamorphosis” and “metaphor”) mimics the oscillation the poem itself effects between metaphor and abstraction. For in the rear of any abstract thought is the very “desire to believe in a metaphor”—as the poem observes in its penultimate section. Metaphor makes palpable what pure abstraction cannot render. It is this capability of metaphor to metamorphose that the poem’s paronomasia reflects.

Although Stevens’ horse disappears from “The Pure Good of Theory” in section I—having been replaced by the “capable being”—the poet would not forget the image in a later poem, “Farewell Without a Guitar” (1954). This poem provides an insight into how “The Pure Good of Theory” treats the possibilities and limits of metaphor. It, too, features a horse “without a rider”:

Spring’s bright paradise has come to this.
Now the thousand-leaved green falls to the ground.
Farewell, my days.

The thousand-leaved red
Comes to this thunder of light
At its autumnal terminal—

A Spanish storm,
A wide, still Aragonese,
In which the horse walks home without a rider,

Head down. The reflections and repetitions,
The blows and buffets of fresh senses
Of the rider that was,

Are a final construction,
Like glass and sun, of male reality
And of that other and her desire. (*CPP* 461–62)

In this retrospective piece, Stevens focuses on the benefits of abstract meditation. The horse becomes a metaphor for not having a metaphor. It represents nothing of itself and without its rider is bereft of significance. An abstract mind, however, looks through the horse to “the rider that was” and conjures for itself “a final construction.” The riderless horse may be a courier without a message, but the mind that conceives what the rider represents revels in the abstract power that brings the “blows and buffets of fresh senses.” It brings the absent rider to life. Even an “autumnal terminal” is no longer terminal when abstraction rekindles “reflections and repetitions.” In other words, the poem heralds the abstract imagination that, as with the recreated soldier who “Constantly . . . steps away” in “Repetitions of a Young Captain” (1944), can create a kind of perpetual present, resistant to time and resistant to the absence of metaphor (see *CPP* 272).⁵

“The Pure Good of Theory,” like the “final construction” of “Farewell Without a Guitar,” eventually aims for a “final need” and “final access” (*CPP* 292). What should be noted here is the resonance Stevens’ riderless horse possesses both in the 1945 poem and in the later work. The image in “The Pure Good of Theory” is meant to stand for time, but it also anticipates “Farewell Without a Guitar” in that it comes to be a metaphor for inadequate metaphor. “The Pure Good of Theory” makes its horse “grotesquely taut,” straining to stretch its full significance. But this metaphor cannot do the job credited to the “capable being” whose presence in the poem not only replaces the “horse,” it also slows the poem down, mimetically representing how such an abstract figure becomes a “retardation” of the “battering” of time. For, although the poem abandons its opening tetrameter, Stevens mimics delaying time by breaking his own meter in the two-stress line “A retardation of its battering.” To reiterate:

Even breathing is the beating of time, in kind:
A retardation of its battering,
A horse grotesquely taut, a walker like

A shadow in mid-earth . . . If we propose
A large-sculptured, platonic person, free from time, . . .

In effect, “The Pure Good of Theory” rejects both meter and metaphor in order to conceive its abstract “capable being.” The “platonic person” is not an idea from another realm, but a practical stalling device resisting both the march of time and the march of tetrameter in the poem.

What the “platonic person” also achieves is pragmatic creation. This is an important component of Stevens’ mature abstraction. The point of con-

ceiving an idea (or ideal) is not that it can be realized, but that it effects a change in current practice or initiates palpable creation. The philosopher Gustav Bergmann conceives an “ideal language” not because such a language can be constructed but because it enables reflection on the language philosophers use to discuss problems. Bergmann cites three conditions for his “ideal language”: “(1) Every nonphilosophical descriptive proposition can in principle be transcribed into it; (2) No unreconstructed philosophical one can; (3) All philosophical propositions can be reconstructed as statements about its syntax . . . and interpretation” (43). If these conditions were fulfilled, it is arguable any proposition would need to be formulated in traditional philosophical terms. This has the pragmatic effect of questioning how philosophers formulate problems in practice.

As Richard Rorty explains in *The Linguistic Turn*:

To see the importance of the suggestion that such a language might be constructed, one should note the implications of the first two conditions alone. Suppose that there were a language in which we could say everything else we wanted to say, but in which we could not express any philosophical thesis, nor ask any philosophical questions. This in itself would be sufficient to show that a certain traditional view of philosophy was false—namely, the view that common sense, and/or the sciences, *present* us with philosophical problems. . . . (6)

In “The Pure Good of Theory,” the poem’s operative “theory” is that abstract meditation enables a similar change in practice or conception. The gesture of proposing a “platonic person” is designed to create the mental condition that defends the mind from the march of time: “A form, then, protected from the battering, may / Mature.” Clearly, no such person could exist or speak. Rather, by imagining “for him the speech he cannot speak,” the “we” of Stevens’ poem achieves a felicitous shield from time, a mental defense mechanism that has the therapeutic function of reconciling the mind to its own finite existence. This is pragmatic abstraction. As William James himself argued in defense of his 1906 portrait of philosophy: “The picture I have given is indeed monstrously over-simplified and rude. But like all abstractions, it will prove to have its use” (19).

II

“The Pure Good of Theory” illustrates Rorty’s and James’s points by creating its abstract “being” in “*Description of a Platonic Person*.” In composing “Description Without Place,” written only a few months after “The Pure Good of Theory,” Stevens wrote to José Rodríguez Feo:

[T]he power of literature is that in describing the world it creates what it describes. Those things that are not described do

not exist, so that in putting together a review like ORIGENES you are really putting together a world. You are describing a world and by describing it you are creating it. (L 495)

What distinguishes "The Pure Good of Theory" from "Description Without Place," however, is that the former really does use descriptive power to create a world. "Description Without Place" may affirm its basic premise, as Stevens rendered it, that "we live in the description of a place and not in the place itself" (L 494). But it is not always successful in describing figurative places, especially mental terrains.

"*Description of a Platonic Person*," by contrast, does create that idealist blend of place and description that neutralizes the dualism between the "real" (or "actual") and the "imaginary" (or "mental"):

Then came Brazil to nourish the emaciated
Romantic with dreams of her avoirdupois, green glade
Of serpents like z rivers simmering,

Green glade and holiday hotel and world
Of the future, in which the memory had gone
From everything, flying the flag of the nude,

The flag of the nude above the holiday hotel. (CPP 290)

South America and the color green represent here the "actual" from which an idealist mind projects "reality." As for Stevens' romantic predecessors, flights of fancy have no place in robust imaginative thought. It is the world that nourishes mental depiction; otherwise the imagination is reduced to an "emaciated / Romantic." As in "Arrival at the Waldorf" (1942), the poem's "holiday hotel" can come to life only if it is set against (or in) the "green and actual Guatemala" (CPP 219).

The hold abstraction has, then, over creating and recreating an "actual world" (L 292) rests on the interaction of mind and environment. This interaction gives weight and substance to each individual's mediated sense of "reality."⁶ "Brazil" and "green" reality possess "avoirdupois." The word signifies a specific system of weights, but, more generally, implies "bodily weight" or "heaviness" (OED). What pragmatic abstraction does is to give weight or form to mental phenomena; as Stevens observes in "Someone Puts a Pineapple Together" (1947), "it becomes a thing / Of weight, on which the weightless rests" (CPP 694). But what anchors Stevens' "platonic person" in a pragmatic aesthetic is the sheer ordinariness the person represents. Playfully, Stevens makes his "platonic" figure so real that he re-enacts the process in which a "capable being" is conceived. In other words, the "platonic person" is not the "capable being" of the poem's previous section. "*Description of a Platonic Person*" mediates its abstract

figure as a human person who re-enacts the job of imagining a “capable being.” Like Joyce’s Bloom, or the “fictive man” (*CPP* 294) seated at his café table in “Paisant Chronicle,” it is vital that this person be ordinary, a part of what Stevens calls, with increasing fascination in his later years, “the normal.”⁷

This is what happens in the remainder of section II:

But there was one invalid in that green glade
And beneath that handkerchief drapeau, severe,

Signal, a character out of solitude,
Who was what people had been and still were,
Who lay in bed on the west wall of the sea,

Ill of a question like a malady,
Ill of a constant question in his thought,
Unhappy about the sense of happiness.

Was it that—a sense and beyond intelligence?
Could the future rest on a sense and be beyond
Intelligence? On what does the present rest?

This platonic person discovered a soul in the world
And studied it in his holiday hotel.
He was a Jew from Europe or might have been.

(*CPP* 290–91)

The “platonic person” is not a metaphysical figure akin to the “walker” of section I “like / A shadow in mid-earth.” His discovery of “a soul in the world” implies the creation of another kind of “capable being.” He partakes of the same abstraction that the poem initially proposes for reader and poet alike. Crucially, however, the “platonic person” is meant to guard Stevens’ poem from meaningless abstraction. This is why “The Pure Good of Theory” anchors its “he” in a palpable context. For abstraction also has the *negative* power of conceiving a “world / Of the future, in which the memory had gone / From everything” and where the “green glade,” “holiday hotel,” and “the flag of the nude” merely signify a fecund but perpetual present.

The “platonic person,” by contrast, is the figure who “was what people had been and still were.” Not only is he placed in a palpable locale (lying “in bed on the west wall of the sea”), he is also a figure who conceives time in a contemporary setting. In 1945, the sentence “He was a Jew from Europe or might have been” must have had astonishing resonance. The ambiguity of “or might have been” naturally opens the door for abstract creation—he could be a Jew or a Hindu or any other figure—but it also

refers the reader to an actual refugee for whom the past, present, and future are of immediate and pressing concern: "On what does the present rest?"

Stevens emphasizes abstraction's power to obliterate the past by shaping these tokens of the present into quasi-compound nouns: green glade, holiday hotel. Often without definite articles—and through their anaphora in section II—"green glade" and "holiday hotel" have a persistent power over "*Description of a Platonic Person*." Even "the flag of the nude," identified by its own definite articles, flies over the poem as an emblem of the present and the pressure abstraction brings to bear on defending the mind from time. Although a "world / Of the future" is conceived, the pregnancy of the past is denied. If history is, as Stephen Dedalus remarks, a nightmare from which we are trying to awake (Joyce 34), "The Pure Good of Theory" appears to replace that nightmare with abstracted "dreams" where the future is reducible to steadfast and comfortable nouns: green glade, holiday hotel, the flag of the nude. But the function of the poem's second section is also to unsettle the confidence with which fanciful abstraction achieves a "form" that may protect us from "the battering."

"The Pure Good of Theory" II also creates an intermediary for the poem's overall struggle between metaphor and abstraction. The "platonic person" emerges as neither pure abstraction—he is too connected with the world to be dangerously abstract—nor a metaphorical figure. Unlike "Brazil" or the "emaciated / Romantic," the "platonic person" cannot be read on a metaphorical level, other than as a metaphor for the very abstraction operative in the poem. In other words, what the "platonic person" embodies or symbolizes is the abstract meditation proposed in section I and re-enacted by the "platonic person" himself in section II. What is the difference between a symbol and a metaphor? A crucifix is a symbol of Christianity. It is only when a Christian is said to "bear the cross" that the crucifix becomes metaphorical. Perhaps, then, it is more accurate to describe the "platonic person" as a symbolic rather than a metaphorical figure. The problem with this distinction, however, is that boundaries between symbol and metaphor—or, for that matter, the literal and metaphorical—are context-dependent and far from conclusive. But I will return to the difficulties of defining metaphor, in particular the uses of metaphor in poetry, later.

What this intermediary "platonic person" focuses on is the *relationship* between metaphor and abstraction. Wallace Martin explains that one function of metaphor is "to describe things that have no literal name" or to render "complex abstractions easy to understand through concrete analogies" (761). "The Pure Good of Theory" scrutinizes the dialectic in which inherited metaphors—particularly those from Western poetic tradition—pressure the poet into cliché while abstract imagining simultaneously enables the creation of new or surprising metaphors. Abstraction achieves this because it encourages the human mind to conceive without immedi-

ate reference to a predetermined or inherited context, even though one originally abstracts something from an existing or inherited context.

In fact, it is withstanding the pressure of an inherited context (represented by the march of time and the past in Stevens' poem) that quickens the poet's attempt to reconstrue "the real" through fresh metaphor. This is similar to the function of "the first idea" in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," as Stevens understood it: "If you take the varnish and dirt of generations off a picture, you see it in its first idea. If you think about the world without its varnish and dirt, you are a thinker of the first idea" (L 426–27)—and we should note how "the first idea" becomes here a metaphor for Stevens' own abstractive imagination. Compellingly, Coleridge also insists in the *Biographia Literaria*: "The word, 'ἰδέα, in its original sense as used by Pindar, Aristophanes, and in the gospel of Matthew, represented the visual abstraction of a distant object, when we see the whole without distinguishing its parts" (BL Vol. I Ch. 5 97). An idealist mind will, however, return the whole to the context of its parts because visualizing in the abstract enables reconstituting phenomena in new ways. This is how new metaphors are born.

III

Section III, "*Fire-Monsters in the Milky Brain*," is a kind of satire on the human mind's dependence on metaphor in conceiving the "real":

Man, that is not born of woman but of air,
That comes here in the solar chariot,
Like rhetoric in a narration of the eye—

We knew one parent must have been divine,
Adam of beau regard, from fat Elysia,
Whose mind malformed this morning metaphor,

While all the leaves leaked gold. His mind made
morning,
As he slept. He woke in a metaphor: this was
A metamorphosis of paradise,

Malformed, the world was paradise malformed . . .
(CPP 291)

"Man, that is not born of woman": Stevens alludes here to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and the weird sisters' conjuring of the Second Apparition—"for none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth" (CW 4.1.96–97: 991). Macbeth is, of course, a literal interpreter, unable to anticipate the figurative narrative of Macduff's birth. But if "*Fire-Monsters in the Milky Brain*" plays with

the human mind's tendency to think in metaphor, what function might Stevens' allusion to *Macbeth's* literalism have?

"Man, that is not born of woman but of air" is an abstraction. A man born of air can neither be literal nor, at least in this context, metaphorical. Stevens' next line deliberately plays with the need to make the abstraction understandable through metaphor: "That comes here in the solar chariot." The "solar chariot" evokes Phoebus and is an obvious metaphor for the sun. But metaphor is something the poem's abstraction wants to resist. Once the abstract man is placed in his "solar chariot," he is subjected to a belittling simile: "Like rhetoric in a narration of the eye." Stevens developed a mistrust of "rhetoric" in the mid-1940s as he began to redirect his own poetics.⁸ Rhetoric "in a narration of the eye" is superfluous. In this pejorative sense, it adds a veneer to what the eye aims to envision. Similarly, the "solar chariot" is a traditional metaphor that blocks novel poetic expression. Although it aims to bring the man born of air to life, it reduces the abstraction to a cliché, to a hackneyed metaphor.

What the ironic allusion to *Macbeth* could imply, then, is that neither literal reading nor clichéd metaphor can lend an abstract idea weight or substance. If, in the manner of *Macbeth*, the man "of air" is read literally, one will dismiss the figure as make-believe. If, in the manner of Macduff, one reads the "man" figuratively, the abstraction still requires further metaphor to come alive, and it risks only partially coming alive if cliché (the "solar chariot") steps into the breach. In short, Stevens' figure is sufficiently abstract that it needs metaphor to be mediated. The point about the Witches is that they are incorporeal, like the Apparitions they conjure. *Macbeth* replies to Banquo's "Whither are they vanished?": "Into the air, and what seemed corporal / Melted as breath into the wind" (CW 1.3.78–80: 978). Similarly, Stevens' man of "air" requires appropriate metaphors if he is to take on form. That it is "Man, that is not born of woman" and not an identified abstract "man"—such as the man, for example, who speaks in "Chocorua to Its Neighbor" (1943) (see *CPP* 264, stanza VIII ff.)—renders the figure importantly insubstantial.

But the allusion to *Macbeth* also opens another intertextual avenue. Shakespeare's play and "The Pure Good of Theory" are both obsessed with time. Time occasions Stevens' battle between abstraction and metaphor—the "capable being" becoming the "form" designed to protect the mind from its own finite existence. Shakespeare himself was keen to stress *Macbeth's* historical relevance to his new patron James I of England (James VI of Scotland) who, as Stanley Wells observes, saw Banquo "as his direct ancestor" (CW 975). Lady *Macbeth* goads *Macbeth* to seize the opportunity Duncan's visit has landed him: "To beguile the time, / Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye, / Your hand, your tongue; look like the innocent flower, / But be the serpent under't" (CW 1.5.62–65: 980). Such "welcome" is a devilish "rhetoric in a narration of the eye," as Stevens has it. Supposing inertia on *Macbeth's* side, Lady *Macbeth* also taunts her hus-

band about his sense of timing: "When you durst do it, then you were a man. . . . Nor time nor place / Did then adhere, and yet you would make both" (CW 1.7.49; 51–52: 981). Having murdered Duncan, Macbeth himself ambivalently comments: "Had I but died an hour before this chance / I had lived a blessed time"; and in the close of the play, hearing of Lady Macbeth's own demise, he observes: "She should have died hereafter. / There would have been a time for such a word" (CW 2.3.90–91: 984; 5.5.16–17: 997). Stevens' poem clearly echoes *Macbeth* substantially. In the "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" speech Macbeth's metaphor for life—"Life's but a walking shadow" (CW 5.5.23: 997–98)—is recalled in the first part of "The Pure Good of Theory," where "the beating of time" is conjured as a "walker like / A shadow in mid-earth."

I am not suggesting Stevens had a copy of *Macbeth* to hand when he wrote "The Pure Good of Theory." I am suggesting that he had absorbed enough of Shakespeare's play that it took hold of his imagination, consciously or otherwise, at the point of creating the poem (and Shakespeare hovers in other 1940s poems such as "Description Without Place," "Repetitions of a Young Captain," and "Montrachet-Le-Jardin"). In making the comparative link, my concern is how temporal perception prompts Stevens' dissection of metaphor and abstraction. The "solar chariot" is a "morning metaphor" both in the sense that it heralds the advent of day and in the ironic sense that it is a metaphor from the beginnings (or "morning") of Western literature. But for all the "metamorphosis" with which metaphor is credited—"He woke in a metaphor"—Stevens' poem resists the various "malformations" metaphor encourages. On the one hand, the poem celebrates that the world is "paradise malformed," neither lost nor regained. On the other, it is wary of certain metaphors as the products of "mind[s] malformed." When "rhetoric" interrupts a "narration of the eye," it is, as Macbeth himself asserts, "a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing" (CW 5.5.25–27: 998).

However, as the end of section III ventures, rejecting ineffective metaphor outright offers no viable alternative to "the desire to believe in a metaphor":

Now, closely the ear attends the varying
Of this precarious music, the change of key

Not quite detected at the moment of change
And, now, it attends the difficult difference.
To say the solar chariot is junk

Is not a variation but an end.
Yet to speak of the whole world as metaphor
Is still to stick to the contents of the mind

And the desire to believe in a metaphor.
It is to stick to the nicer knowledge of
Belief, that what it believes in is not true. (CPP 291)

Music—and, by association, time—becomes here an ironic metaphor for the poem's own attempt to discover a "moment" between the total rejection of metaphor (saying "the solar chariot is junk" and, implicitly, all metaphors with it) and its total embrace ("to speak of the whole world as metaphor"). Note also how the "precarious music" is itself susceptible to the pauses and effects of Stevens' own grasp of sound and rhythm. After the ellipsis following "the world was paradise malformed . . ." Stevens' "Now" forms a staccato attack that then describes what the poem itself effects:

the world was paradise malformed . . .
Now, closely the ear attends the varying
Of this precarious music, the change of key

Not quite detected at the moment of change
And, now, it attends the difficult difference.

That "Now" is itself a "change of key" that is "Not quite detected at the moment of change" because the reader cannot be sure, following the ellipsis, if the "Now" is a new theme or the continuation of another "variation" (both in its musical and thematic senses). Where the poem reiterates "And, *now*, it [the ear] attends" the reader is alerted to the poem's own music, preparing for the "difficult difference" concerning the "solar chariot" and metaphor at large.

It is not simply that section III is mimetic. It is self-reflexive in a double sense. In the first instance, the poem refers to a "precarious music" as a metaphor embodying the dangers of metaphor-building. But as a metaphor for that very process, this "precarious music" is then represented as part of the poem's own handling of metaphor. The discussion of the "solar chariot" has a dangerously abrupt sound: "To say the solar chariot is junk / Is not a variation but an end." In other words, not only does music act as a metaphor *for* the problems of creating metaphors; the poem takes that metaphor and visits its own "precarious music" on "The Pure Good of Theory."

IV

Sonorous play conditions the poem's final battle between metaphor and abstraction. Stevens achieves a marriage of sound, theme, and technique that his other 1940s poems—ones equally interested in "sound"—do not acquire. I will argue shortly that this attention to sound establishes the bridge between abstraction and metaphor that "The Pure Good of Theory" cannot evade, despite its overall aim of privileging abstract meditation over

metaphor. Tellingly, the poem's subtitles mark the trajectory of this battle. "*Fire-Monsters in the Milky Brain*," however enigmatic, is a title rife with metaphor. The poem's concluding section, by contrast, is "*Dry Birds Are Fluttering in Blue Leaves*—." For all the color symbolism of the Stevens corpus, it is quite possible to read this title as a literal statement, or at least as an abstraction without metaphor. Section IV appropriately makes the poetic argument that abstraction is at the root of every rendering of "reality."

As the final section of the poem declares:

It is never the thing but the version of the thing:
The fragrance of the woman not her self,
Her self in her manner not the solid block,

The day in its color not perpending time,
Time in its weather, our most sovereign lord,
The weather in words and words in sounds of sound.

(CPP 292)

Every "version" of a thing rests on abstracting some part of an "actual" phenomenon and carrying that abstraction as the idea of "the thing": the "fragrance of the woman not her self," day as embodied in its "color" (and not as a sign of "time"), time in the "blows and buffets," as "Farewell Without a Guitar" would say, of "its weather." Stevens envisages an infinite regress in which every phenomenon is rendered in some quality attributable to it by resemblance and association. This is a function of the idealist construction of "reality": "weather" is a matter of words and words themselves are distinguished through "sounds of sound."

But Stevens does more than illustrate this variation on a Kantian position. Continuous with section I, abstraction is seen to be a barrier against the battering of time. If one conceives the "day in its color not perpending time," one creates an abstraction without time's reduction of this imaginative projection to a finite context. Stevens draws here, consciously or not, on his reading of Charles Mauron's *Aesthetics and Psychology*. Mauron insists that the function of art is to arrest present perception:

In life we scarcely look or listen at all, except in view of some future activity. . . . Now the unreality of the work of art debars us straight off from any *action* of this kind. The first words the artist seems to say to us are: "Look, listen, but don't move. For one moment stop living, and therefore responding automatically to outside stimuli. Don't try to do anything: you can see there is nothing to do. The interest lies in what you are going to feel." (31)

Mauron notes that abstraction—in his argument, the search for a "pure art"—resides "in the domain of the senses" (19). Stevens makes a similar

affirmation. To “perpend” is to ponder; and, as its etymology implies, pondering involves weight (from *pendere*: “to weigh”). As with the “avoir-dupois” of section II, abstraction puts off the burden of unnecessary thought in order to create the imaginative haven where the ephemeral, or ethereal, is given human substance: “it becomes a thing / Of weight, on which the weightless rests” (*CPP* 694). However, like section II, the point of this power is its effect on the “actual.” Abstraction should not, on the Stevensian view, create another world adjacent or parallel to time, the weather, the fragrance of women, and so on. It is instead what gives weight on a perceptual level to the “actual.”

No sooner than abstraction is lauded in section IV, metaphor re-exerts its hold on Stevens’ poem. This is no coincidence. I argued earlier that metaphors help abstract figures become mediated. What is comical about section IV, however, is that the metaphors inundating the poem’s close do not help its argument about abstraction; at least, they are not there to make abstract ideas concrete. “The Pure Good of Theory” closes with a sonorous nightmare in which metaphor is heaped on metaphor—but where, as the poem quips, everything “remains the same.” It is as though Stevens’ poem were inscribing its own “ferocious alphabets” for no other purpose than to demonstrate the beguiling properties of metaphor itself.

Section IV concludes:

These devastations are the divertissements
Of a destroying spiritual that digs-a-dog,
Whines in its hole for puppies to come see,

Springs outward, being large, and, in the dust,
Being small, inscribes ferocious alphabets,
Flies like a bat expanding as it flies,

Until its wings bear off night’s middle witch;
And yet remains the same, the beast of light,
Groaning in half-exploited gutturals

The need of its element, the final need
Of final access to its element—
Of access like the page of a wiggy book,

Touched suddenly by the universal flare
For a moment, a moment in which we read and repeat
The eloquences of light’s faculties. (*CPP* 292)

These are devastations indeed. In this alliterative and assonantal jumble, each metaphor is its own divertissement: a “divertissement” being a short ballet between musical acts, hence, in general, a diversion or interlude

(*OED*). Like a divertimento the function of each metaphor is distraction. The poem continues the musical metaphor for the problems of metaphor-building with its “destroying *spiritual*,” the word implying African-American song. These last five stanzas comprise one introspective sentence that for all the imagery of expansion—springing “outward,” the bat “expanding as it flies”—draws the reader into a Charybdis of metaphor. Syntactically, the “devastations” are the “divertissements” that comprise the “spiritual” that, in league with the poem’s own paronomasia, is itself metamorphosed repeatedly—becoming dog-like (“digs-a-dog”), flying “like a bat”—only to create other flagrantly metaphorical figures: “night’s middle witch,” “the beast of light.” But in this saturation of metaphor it becomes harder and harder to envisage the abstraction or idea that each metaphor was meant to embody or resemble.

Does the close of “The Pure Good of Theory” represent, then, as Macbeth says of life, “a tale . . . full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing”? Far from it. Stevens is pushing metaphor to its limits and for a particular purpose. He is gesturing to what “Three Academic Pieces” describes as the “gradus ad Metaphoram” (*CPP* 692), in which every “resemblance” approaches an ultimate abstraction: the metaphor of metaphors, or what “The Pure Good of Theory” calls a “final access.” In other words, Stevens implies that in the rear of all metaphor-building is the desire for an abstract *telos*. Just as, conversely, no abstraction can fully come to life without the introduction of metaphor, the desire for metaphor is allied to what Stevens calls “the final need,” the attempt to create an ultimate abstraction, be it God, the Truth, or Reality. For the philosophical pragmatist—and with regard to Stevens’ pragmatist phases—this is an intriguing and baffling, even nonsensical desire; and Stevens’ simile for that “final access” (“Of access like the page of a wiggly book”) implies a fusty and fustian philosophical enterprise worthy of parody, like the perfect page from a book by a venerable “beard” (Stevens has mocked “beards” before in “Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas” [1942] as well as “wigs,” specifically in “the wigs despoiling the Satan ear” [*CPP* 49] from “Banal Sojourn” [1919]).

Classical rhetoric associates metaphor with “transference.” Early twentieth-century accounts of the trope developed the concept of transference by insisting metaphor not only transfers points of resemblance between things (it was Aristotle who insisted “the right use of metaphor means an eye for resemblances”), but it also creates new meanings (Martin 761). In recent years, Donald Davidson’s contrary insistence that metaphorical meaning differs in no important regard from literal meaning has accrued currency among literary critics. Originally aired in a symposium on metaphor in *Critical Inquiry* in 1978, Davidson’s “What Metaphors Mean” has attracted wide attention, as have other essays championed by contemporary Davidsonians such as Reed Way Dasenbrock. A relatively recent article on Stevens, Davidson, and metaphor both harnesses Davidson’s view

of metaphor to read Stevens and hopes to recontextualize the validity of Davidson's departure from the so-called "fusion" theorists. This article is part of another symposium entitled "Davidson and Literary Understanding" (see Stroud-Drinkwater). Like any resourceful literary text, "The Pure Good of Theory" can accommodate both Davidson's view of metaphor and views departing from Davidson, for example Nelson Goodman's arguments for the trope. I want to turn briefly to this divergence of view because it helps to understand the close of "The Pure Good of Theory" and its handling of metaphor and abstraction.

In "What Metaphors Mean," Davidson argues that "metaphors mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation mean, and nothing more." As such Davidson challenges the idea that "a metaphor has, in addition to its literal sense or meaning, another sense or meaning" (32). Davidson's interest is not in reducing the magic metaphor entails. He simply critiques the notion that metaphor involves an additional "content to be captured." The job of this trope is to make readers or listeners sit up and pay attention to what metaphor itself achieves: "all the while we are in fact focusing on what metaphor makes us notice." As Davidson observes, "there is no limit to what a metaphor calls to our attention" (46)—and he is the first to admit that metaphor is "the dreamwork of language" where "its interpretation reflects as much on the interpreter as on the originator" (31).

Nelson Goodman, by contrast, dispatches what he describes as "the confusing word 'meaning'" and, contra Davidson, asserts that words and sentences have different types of literal and metaphorical "application" (125). As Goodman argues: "Metaphor in my view involves withdrawing a term or rather a schema of terms from an initial literal application and applying it in a new way to effect a new sorting either of the same or of a different realm" (128). In making this claim, however, Goodman does not seem to depart from Davidson that drastically, unless, of course, the tentative notion of effecting a "new sorting" of "a different realm" suggests a different arena of meaning in which metaphor operates.

Where Goodman clearly departs from Davidson is in questioning the idea that a metaphor can be understood through literal paraphrase. Davidson acknowledges that metaphors are indeed hard to paraphrase but this is not because they comprise different meanings from those involved in literal interpretation. As Goodman responds:

The acknowledged difficulty and even impossibility of finding a literal paraphrase for most metaphors is offered by Davidson as evidence that there is nothing to be paraphrased—that a sentence says nothing metaphorically that it does not say literally, but rather functions differently, inviting comparisons and stimulating thought. But paraphrase of many literal sentences also is exceedingly difficult, and indeed we may seriously question

whether any sentence can be translated exactly into other words in the same or any other language. (126)

In other words, Goodman avows that the problem with paraphrasing metaphors is not that there is nothing to be paraphrased in addition to literal meaning but that “the metaphorical application of terms has the effect, and usually the purpose, of drawing significant boundaries that cut across ruts worn by habit, of picking out new relevant kinds for which we have no simple and familiar literal descriptions” (126–27). This is tantamount to claiming there is such a thing as metaphorical significance different in kind from literal significance.

It should be observed that neither Davidson nor Goodman excludes poetry and literature from their arguments about metaphor. This is not, then, a philosophical dispute pertaining to “normal” forms of discourse because for these philosophers there is no normal discourse. The Davidsonian position, “There is no such thing as a language,” where “a language” is meant to be a transparently shared medium—“a clearly defined shared structure which language users master and then apply to cases” (“A Nice Derangement” 446)—has to be held in mind when discussing “literal” and “metaphorical” meaning. For these very terms have equivocal currency for language users. They will be the subject of perpetual debate, just as theories of tropes were for Quintillian the occasions of “interminable disputes among the teachers of literature, who have quarreled no less violently with the philosophers than among themselves” (Martin 760).

Why, then, bring Davidson and Goodman into a discussion of Stevens’ use of metaphor in “The Pure Good of Theory” if arguments concerning the nature of metaphor cannot themselves be resolved? The answer is that Stevens’ poem anticipates and demonstrates the problem with retaining a concept of metaphor that depends either on a continuity or difference between literal and metaphorical meaning. As the 1946 poem “Pieces” insists: “There is a sense in sounds beyond their meaning” (CPP 307). Specifically, what the close of Stevens’ poem demonstrates is that the “final need” for an abstract “final access” *relates* to metaphor-building because, as Davidson argues, one of the effects of metaphor is the desire to capture a “hidden meaning.”

If the reader pursues a hidden meaning—trying to give extra currency to Stevens’ “beast of light,” his “middle witch,” the “divertissements,” the “expanding” bat and scurrying “puppies”—he is referred repeatedly not to another realm of significance but to the activity of metaphor itself. Metaphor is heaped on metaphor and in this downward spiral the reader learns the poet cannot help but call on this trope in evoking his “universal flare.” The phrase sums up precisely the relation between abstraction—for example, the thought of an unattainable “universal”—and metaphor, here represented by the luminous connotations of “flare.” It is simply not

possible to wrest metaphor and abstraction apart, just as the phrase “universal flare” cannot be unpacked into a literal/abstract meaning distinct from its metaphorical significance.

No literal rendering of the end of “The Pure Good of Theory” can do justice to the poem, but not merely because metaphors are hard to paraphrase. There are simply too many cross-fertilizing metaphors in the poem’s last sentence to construe its senses clearly. Davidson would have been taken with Stevens’ use of the phrase “And yet remains the same” in the fifth stanza. On the Davidsonian view, whatever is said in a poem does not change because of the proliferation of metaphor. Instead, the closing metaphors of “The Pure Good of Theory” are signs, as “The Motive for Metaphor” has it, for “*Desiring* the exhilarations of changes” (CPP 257; emphasis added); they are not earth-shattering changes themselves. But what Stevens’ poem also demonstrates, as Nelson Goodman would argue, is that there are some uses of metaphor that render the test of paraphrase irrelevant. For it is debatable whether there is a literal content to Stevens’ final sentence that needs to be teased out of the poem’s spiraling metaphors. The poem is demonstrative and its “theory” is not reducible to a straightforward thesis. The 1947 poem “Bouquet of Roses in Sunlight” will even claim “sense exceeds all metaphor” (CPP 370).

What “The Pure Good of Theory” ultimately achieves is the reconciliation of metaphor to abstraction, a strategy that rescues Stevens from attempting to conceive an inhuman “abstract.” The “final access” is, after all, based on a “final need,” a human predicament. Inherited metaphors pressure the poet into cliché, but abstract meditation invites the creation of new, invigorating metaphors because, as was argued earlier, abstraction encourages conception without direct reference to a predetermined or inherited context. Thus the close of the poem wittily proffers the glut of metaphors that Stevens, at his most abstract, can muster.

CONCLUSION

What picture does this reading suggest of Stevens’ poetics in the mid-1940s and beyond? Certainly “The Pure Good of Theory” is not an isolated case. As was also noted earlier, the 1947 lecture “Three Academic Pieces” gives weight to the notion that by the late 1940s Stevens was accommodated to the type of pragmatic abstraction that “The Pure Good of Theory” illustrates. “Three Academic Pieces” itself constructs a “particular abstraction” (CPP 693). The lecture forms a special case in *The Necessary Angel* because it ostensibly generates the poem “Someone Puts a Pineapple Together.” It is as if Stevens wanted to substantiate his own claim: “hypotheses relating to poetry, although they may appear to be very distant illuminations, could be the fires of fate” (CPP 692)—a poetic image that ironically “anticipates” the appearance of his own poem.

Certainly, this “abstraction,” and the poem inspired by it, forms the most affirmative and defensive part of the lecture:

There is a gradus ad Metaphoram. . . . A poetic metaphor—that is to say, a metaphor poetic in a sense more specific than the sense in which poetry and metaphor are one—appears to be poetry at its source. It is. At least it is poetry at one of its sources although not necessarily the most fecundating. But the steps to this particular abstraction, the gradus ad Metaphoram in respect to the general sense in which poetry and metaphor are one, are, like the ascent to any of the abstractions that interest us importantly, an ascent through illusion which gathers round us more closely and thickly, as we might expect it to do, the more we penetrate it. (*CPP* 692–93)

“Gradus” means a “step” or “level” and the word refers back to Stevens’ earlier comments in the lecture on “level” and “resemblance” (*CPP* 688). The “gradus ad Metaphoram” is conjured here as an abstraction designed to *resemble* what is meant by metaphor in the commonplace sense where “poetry and metaphor are one.” It is a poetic sleight-of-hand.

As if this were not challenging enough, the “gradus ad Metaphoram” also becomes a quasi-compound noun intended as a metaphor for metaphor. It is the concept of metaphor conceived at its most abstract: the ultimate metaphor to which all metaphors refer. If metaphor, in its Greek sense of “transference,” can, in the end, be defined as “a trope . . . in which a word or phrase is shifted from its normal uses to a context where it evokes new meanings” (Martin 760), Stevens’ abstraction can be seen as a metaphor for rethinking the function of metaphor itself. This is the “transference” it attempts. But Stevens also uses the “gradus ad Metaphoram” as an illustration of “the ascent to *any* of the abstractions that interest us importantly.” Not only is this “Metaphoram” a metaphor for metaphor, it is also a metaphor for abstraction; and, like metaphor, although abstraction does not necessarily create “new meanings,” it does *evoke* new views of “reality.”

Paul Ricoeur has argued that metaphor does indeed condition “reality,” although he artfully demonstrates, in a Coleridgean fashion, that the solution to the question of what metaphors do is involved in the notion of what “reality” might comprise.⁹ Ricoeur suggests:

When we ask whether metaphorical language reaches reality, we presuppose that we already know what reality is. But if we assume that metaphor redescribes reality, we must then assume that this reality as redescribed is itself novel reality. My conclusion is that the strategy of discourse implied in metaphorical language is neither to improve communication nor to ensure univocity in argumentation, but to shatter and to increase our sense of reality by shattering and increasing our language. . . . With metaphor we experience the metamorphosis of both language and reality. (132–33)

Similarly, if abstraction has a hand in devising new metaphors, one could easily extend Ricoeur's comments to an abstract aesthetic—and the obsession of "The Pure Good of Theory" with "metamorphosis" naturally coincides with Ricoeur's conclusion. Stevens' attraction to abstraction is precisely that it frees up the poet's mind to reconfigure and refresh "reality"—even if, and indeed because, there is the risk of shattering language and "reality" (poetry, in this sense, really could be a destructive force). In short, the abstract tendency in Stevens is a perpetual search after the conditions of imaginative change, whether such change applies to poetry or life or both (for Stevens, poetry and life are not, of course, separate spheres). That risk is captured in "Three Academic Pieces," where abstraction is ideally "an ascent through illusion" but where, in making that ascent, illusion itself "gathers round us more closely and thickly, as we might expect it to do, the more we penetrate it."

It is this abstract quality, I think, that upsets Stevens' harshest critics, for it could suggest an imagination that swings free of historical or social contingencies. But, like Maurice Blanchot, Stevens is neither ahistorical nor at an aloof remove—and the poet is absorbingly idealist, not solipsistic.¹⁰ Blanchot, to whom Stevens was drawn in later life, argues persuasively that "the work"—the abstract ideal to which every writer is drawn but can never achieve—is the main catalyst of a writer's activity and that the social and historical conditions of that activity are merely parts of a larger whole.¹¹ As he notes in "The Disappearance of Literature":

[T]he poem is the depth which opens onto the experience which makes it possible, the strange movement which goes from the work towards the origin of the work, the work itself become the restless, infinite pursuit of its own source. It must be added that, while historical circumstances exert their pressure on such movements to the extent of appearing to govern them—so it is said that the writer, who takes as the object of his activity the uncertain essence of that activity, is merely reflecting what is becoming his own precarious social position—they are not on their own capable of explaining the significance of this pursuit. (139)

If searching for new metaphors obsesses the writer in pursuit of "the work," one outcome of "the poem" is the reflection of that very life-consuming task—and, in Stevens, a penchant for abstract meditation on life, words, "imagination," and "reality" combines to equally resourceful effect.

Such abstraction also brings life and art into more vivid apprehension for Proust's narrator in *In Search of Lost Time*—many of Stevens' themes also being Proustian. As the young Marcel reflects on reading Bergotte:

I no longer had the impression I was in the presence of a particular passage from a certain book by Bergotte, tracing on the

surface of my mind a purely linear figure, but rather of the “ideal passage” by Bergotte, common to all his books, to which all the analogous passages that merged with it had added a sort of thickness, a sort of volume, by which my mind seemed enlarged. (*The Way by Swann’s* 96)¹²

Of course, in establishing these parallels it is possible to conceive just about any imaginative perception as “abstract” if we argue that its effects enlarge the mind as a response to an ideal. But readers of Stevens, sympathetic and unsympathetic alike, cannot help but respond to the strange quality of a poetry that somehow occupies emotion, desire, ideas, and perception rather than “experiencing” these phenomena in a poetic vein. For sympathetic readers, the abstract quality will add, as Proust writes, “a sort of thickness, a sort of volume” that enlarges perception. For dissatisfied readers of Stevens, abstraction falls into imaginative “illusion” of the kind that “gathers round us more closely and thickly . . . the more we penetrate it”—precisely the condition that Stevens’ “abstraction” in “Three Academic Pieces” is meant to transcend.

In my view, Stevensian abstraction has a pragmatic purpose both for the poet and reader. As Paul Valéry argues in “Poetry and Abstract Thought” (1939), a “poet’s function . . . is not to experience the poetic state” but “to create it in others” (60). Stevens thereby aims to satisfy both his imagination and ours.¹³ But there is space here neither to explore the relationship between “Three Academic Pieces” and the later poetry nor to provide a fuller picture of the poet’s interest in abstraction. It should be clear, however, that “The Pure Good of Theory,” in its telling allusion to *Macbeth*, involves a significant dialogue between metaphor and abstraction that heralds the mature abstract aesthetic of Stevens’ late and last work. And it may be that the very abstract quality for which Stevens is taken to task—as an irresponsible aesthete oblivious to the world beyond the page—is, viewed differently, the source both of the poet’s interrogation of “reality” and of the delight he instills in the sympathetic, turned empathetic, reader.

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Notes

¹ “The Pure Good of Theory,” “A Word with José Rodríguez-Feo,” “Paisant Chronicle,” “Flyer’s Fall.” *Voices* (Wallace Stevens issue) 121 (Spring 1945): 25–29.

² I have suggested elsewhere that “Description Without Place” II wryly critiques Stevens’ “major man” figure through its “major mind” and “major manner” (*CPP* 297); see my “Good-bye Major Man.”

³ For “sound,” see in particular “Certain Phenomena of Sound” (1942) and “The Creations of Sound” (1944). The on-line Concordance to Stevens’ poetry tracks the high frequency of these words in the 1940s verse (see Serio and Foster).

⁴ Stevens' "*All the Preludes*" naturally evokes Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, which also scrutinizes abstract imagination and idealism. The power of abstraction is sublime and, therefore, a source both of wonder and danger for Wordsworth. As Book Sixth observes: "Mighty is the charm / Of those abstractions to a mind beset / With images, and haunted by itself, / And specially delightful unto me / Was that clear synthesis built up aloft / So gracefully, even then when it appeared / No more than as a plaything, or a toy / Embodied to the sense—not what it is / In verity, an independent world / Created out of pure intelligence" (1805 version, Book Sixth, ll. 178–87: 194). Wordsworth worries in the same part of the poem that Coleridge's idealist temperament borders on solipsism. Speaking of "That other spirit, Coleridge" (l. 237: 198), the poem proceeds to question "The self-created sustenance of a mind / Debarred from Nature's living images, / Compelled to be a life unto itself, / And unrelentingly possessed by thirst / Of greatness, love, and beauty" (ll. 312–17: 202). I explain below how "The Pure Good of Theory" resists negative abstraction and what abstraction comes to mean both in Stevens' poem and in the 1947 lecture "Three Academic Pieces."

⁵ Stevens' horse "without a rider" also indirectly echoes the 1942 lecture "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words." In that lecture, Plato's "charioteer" is cited as a figure that has become "antiquated and rustic" (*CPP* 643) to the contemporary imagination. Clark Mills's statue of Andrew Jackson astride his horse is, by contrast, not "rustic" for Stevens, but it is an example of Coleridgean "fancy" (*CPP* 648)—as is "a painting called *Wooden Horses*" (*CPP* 649). Most compelling for an early insight into Stevens' mature sense of abstraction, however, is the following passage:

Suppose we try, now, to construct the figure of a poet, a possible poet. He cannot be a charioteer traversing vacant space, however ethereal. He must have lived all of the last two thousand years, and longer. . . . He will have thought that Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton placed themselves in remote lands and in remote ages; that their men and women were the dead—and not the dead lying in the earth, but the dead still living in their remote lands and in their remote ages. . . . [H]is own measure as a poet, in spite of all the passions of all the lovers of the truth, is the measure of his power to abstract himself, and to withdraw with him into his abstraction the reality on which the lovers of truth insist. He must be able to abstract himself and also to abstract reality, which he does by placing it in his imagination. He knows perfectly that he cannot be too noble a rider, that he cannot rise up loftily in helmet and armor on a horse of imposing bronze. (*CPP* 656–57)

I cite this famous passage at length because of the parity between its "possible poet" and the figure of a rider. In other words, just as this part of "The Noble Rider" concerns the abstract act of constructing a "possible poet" as a modern rider (and *not* an old-fashioned "charioteer traversing vacant space"), "The Pure Good of Theory" shares with "Farewell Without a Guitar" the ability to create abstract figures who can stand in for antiquated, deceased, or merely absent riders: a "platonic person," a "capable being." That Stevens' "possible poet" has been alive forever and has direct contact with the dead "still living in their remote lands and in their remote ages" also prefigures how "The Pure Good of Theory" confronts time—and, in particular, how abstract thought is negatively and positively *timeless* (see analysis of section II). Significantly, Shakespeare connotes an abstract timelessness for Stevens in "The Noble Rider" just as the allusion to *Macbeth* in "The Pure Good of Theory" investigates both time and abstract meditation (see reading of section III below). The larger argument here is that "The Noble Rider" anticipates the abstraction Stevens realizes more fully in the poetry of the mid-1940s and beyond.

⁶ Although I ally idealism with abstraction here—and have noted earlier that Stevens' abstraction is both pragmatic and implicitly shares with pragmatist philosophy similar attitudes to "reality" and to the work of the "imagination"—I am aware that pragmatism diverges from certain kinds of idealism (for example, that of Berkeley). Pragmatists acknowledge the independent existence of the physical world—a point that has led critics to question how pragmatism can argue "reality" merely depends upon choices of language-game or vocabulary. But, as Rorty has argued, "[t]he pragmatist meets this point by differentiating himself from the idealist. He agrees that there is such a thing as brute physical resistance—the pressure of light waves on Galileo's eyeball, or of the stone on Dr. Johnson's boot. But he sees no way of transferring this nonlinguistic brutality to *facts*, to the truth of sentences. . . . As Donald Davidson says, causation is not under a description but explanation is" ("Texts and Lumps" 81). This is similar to Dewey's point that one "cannot compare existence and meaning; they are disparate. . . . There is no common measure of physical existence and conscious experience because the latter is the only measure there is for the former" (6).

⁷ In 1946, Stevens writes to Henry Church: "For myself, the inaccessible jewel is the normal and all of life, in poetry, is the difficult pursuit of just that" (L 521). The poet's concern with "the ordinary" is also relevant here.

⁸ This stance is allied to the poet's misgivings about "the literary," which is in turn a corollary of the need to achieve "the normal" (see above). For Stevens' mid-1940s suspicions of "the literary," see L 505, 510.

⁹ Coleridge shows a similar understanding when he notes: "What is poetry? is so nearly the same question with, what is a poet? that the answer to the one is involved in the solution of the other. For it is a distinction resulting from the poetic genius itself, which sustains and modifies the images, thoughts, and emotions of the poet's own mind" (BL Vol. II, 15).

¹⁰ Stanley Fish argues that it is not in any case possible to be a solipsist for the same reason that it is impossible to be a practising relativist: "No one can *be* a relativist, because no one can achieve the distance from his own beliefs and assumptions which would result in their being no more authoritative *for him* than the beliefs and assumptions held by others, or, for that matter, the beliefs and assumptions he himself used to hold" ("Is There a Text in This Class?" 319). Likewise, "an individual's assumptions and opinions are not 'his own' in any sense that would give body to the fear of solipsism" (320).

¹¹ Writing to Peter Lee in 1955, Stevens remarked: "I love Maurice Blanchot" (L 879). Stevens came to Blanchot through the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, probably through "The Disappearance of Literature" which was published as "Où va la littérature (I)" (*Nouvelle Revue Française* 7 [July 1953]), reprinted as "The Disappearance of Literature" in *The Blanchot Reader*.

¹² There are numerous other instances in Proust of the idealist loop in which an abstract imagination reconfigures "reality." For example, in the second volume of *In Search of Lost Time* the narrator observes: "it is only ever we ourselves, through our belief that things seen have an existence of their own, who can impart to some of them a soul which lives in them, and which they then develop in us" (*In the Shadow* 115).

¹³ Valéry's essay was also translated by Gerard Hopkins for *Essays on Language and Literature*, ed. J. L. Hevesi (69–111). Stevens owned the 1948 edition of this book—see Moynihán 89.

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Ariel Among the Second Selves: Stevens and Wordsworth in Creative Conversation

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ACCORDING TO SOCRATES, the man who has pieces of knowledge about what is right, fine, and good should talk with a fitting soul. He must make use of the art of dialectic rather than write his words down, since every composition is “incapable of defending or helping itself” (275e 6: 125). But Socrates also tells Phaedrus that this man “will sow and write for amusement . . . gardens of letters, . . . laying up a store of reminders both for himself, when he ‘reaches a forgetful old age,’ and for anyone who is following the same track, and he will be pleased as he watches their tender growth” (276d 1–6: 127).

Wallace Stevens’ *Collected Poems* was published on his seventy-fifth birthday in October 1954. During the preceding months, the poet received various “gypsy cards” from Barbara Church as she wandered through Europe. He imagined, “To have gone through all of these places again must have made you feel the thrill of a very complicated experience—like reading an extremely mature poem” (L 837). At this time, in “‘forgetful old age’” and at home, Stevens was going through all the places of his poems again—he was looking over his store of reminders as he prepared for his forthcoming book. Stevens called this “good housekeeping” (L 832); Socrates would say that he was tending to his gardens of letters.

The poet described the resigned thrill of this very complicated experience in an extremely mature poem, “The Planet on the Table.” The still-to-be published *Collected Poems*, still imagined as “The Whole of Harmonium” (see L 831), is the planet or globe on the table and Ariel was pleased to watch the tender growth of his gardens of letters:

Ariel was glad he had written his poems.
They were of a remembered time
Or of something seen that he liked.

Other makings of the sun
Were waste and welter
And the ripe shrub writhed. (CPP 450)

As we follow the same track as Stevens, it is tempting to read "The Planet on the Table," the antepenultimate poem of his *Collected Poems*, as if it is the epigraph to the poet's own gardens of letters. At the very end of the book, we are presented with its superscription, which might have appeared after the publisher's imprint. But this epigraph is tucked away at the end because it also sounds as if it is the poet's epitaph, spoken on the occasion of his burial and then inscribed upon his tomb. Turning to the second stanza, we ask, is the poet still tending to his and others' gardens of letters? Or has he already been garlanded like other makers with the writhed Bay-laurel? Or does the poem lie on the poet's grave as a wreath woven out of all flowers and shrubs, gathered from an inward anthology, or golden treasury of the poet's own and others' makings, now closing at the final place of repose? The speaker of this poem writes of a figure called Ariel who had amused himself with, or was amused by Stevens, setting down poems to lay up for himself a store of reminders against forgetful old age. In Socrates' opinion, "A more severe, / More harassing master" (*CPP* 415) would have employed the art of dialectic and planted truths in other minds during the time of conversation.

My argument is that Stevens is such a severe master because he writes as if he is in "creative conversation." His self-allusions and allusions to other poets—or his store of reminders—are disposed in conversations, which become creative as readers are drawn into them. This fanciful notion plays with the younger Stevens' languid admission, "If I were to have my will I should live with many spirits" (*SP* 146), but it allows us to talk about what becomes central to the older poet. When Stevens lays up a store of reminders, it is both for and of himself and for and of those following the same track. His poems remember—they help the poet remember and remind others to respond—because they are in conversation with other souls. These conversations make Stevens' poems rememberable makings as, for Wordsworth, "The earth / And common face of nature spoke to me / Rememberable things" (1805 *Prelude* I. 614–16: 68–70), but in a manner that distinguishes them from other memorials such as wreaths and epitaphs.

Stevens' poems are in creative conversation with the souls of poets who have followed the same track before as he recollects their poems, allowing them to respond from beyond the grave. But his poems are also in creative conversation with the soul of any after-reader, still following the same track of growing older, while watching the tender growth of his reminders. I envision that Stevens' creative conversations look as far before as Shakespeare, drawing in Milton and the romantic poets, and after to certain late twentieth-century poets, including Elizabeth Bishop, A. R. Ammons, and John Ashbery. My aim here is to partake of Stevens' creative conversation with Wordsworth. We will look at Stevens' "The Planet on the Table" and "A Postcard from the Volcano" and parts of two poems by Wordsworth, "The Pedlar" section of *The Excursion* and "Tintern Abbey."¹

Socrates calls poetry making a mere pastime because he values speech above writing. We can brood upon this distinction in terms of the relation between our everyday conversations and what I call creative conversation. We now think of ordinary conversation as familiar discourse or talk. But the word "conversation" denoted originally a greater range of intercourse, extending from sex to Socratic dialogue. As we discern creative conversations expanding between poems written across the generations, we discover that these open our domestic conversations into a consideration of our time when we have our being in a place and among people.

Milton uses the word "conversation" only once in *Paradise Lost*, when Adam relates to Raphael his conversation with God, before the creation of Eve, pleading for human fellowship. The crucial turn in this conversation about conversation, which makes use of the art of dialectic, occurs when Adam says to God:

To attain
The height and depth of thy eternal ways
All human thoughts come short, supreme of things
Thou in thyself art perfect, and in thee
Is no deficiency found; not so is man,
But in degree, the cause of his desire
By conversation with his like to help,
Or solace his defects. (VIII. 412–19: 451)

"Conversation" is from the Latin, *converso*, meaning literally "to turn round," "to turn oneself about," "to move to and fro," and three ways to be in the world: "to abide, live or dwell somewhere"; "to live with, have intercourse with, keep company with"; and "to live or pass one's life" (Lewis and Short). Milton's application of the word looks before to early modern Latinate conceptions of "conversation," which depend on considerations of time as much as patterns of speech. As Bruce R. Smith explains:

Understood within [the] coordinates of place, persons, and time, "conversation" is not so much a set of actions as an existential condition: being with certain people in a certain place across a certain span of time. (253)

What distinguishes creative conversation from domestic conversation is the function of memory, the mother of the muses. When Stevens and Wordsworth converse across the generations, they at once inhabit and inscribe poems upon two different but related memory systems. One memory model is conceived as a table, tablet, or book awaiting inscription and the other is a dwelling place or thesaurus, which is literally the storehouse or treasury of a temple or mansion. As one mode of conversation becomes

another through the creative art of memory, we discover how patterns of speech are changed by different considerations of time. Creative conversation exalts domestic conversation in an accurate or careful manner so that poets or poems are turned toward each other to speak of "Rememberable things." When a poet remembers in a poem, he is "carrying everywhere with him relationship and love" (Wordsworth, Preface, *Poetical Works* 738).

In "The Planet on the Table," it was not important that Ariel's poems survive:

What mattered was that they should bear
Some lineament or character,

Some affluence, if only half-perceived,
In the poverty of their words,
Of the planet of which they were part. (*CPP* 450)

The table of the poem's title is the table or tablet of the poet's memory inscribed with forms of nature and great objects bearing the impression of his time on the planet or the "something seen that he liked." Since Stevens has spent a large portion of his life musing intently through the writing of poems, and thus laying up a store of reminders, the table of his memory also bears the impression of what was inscribed on other tables or in earlier poems. In forgetful old age, Stevens is pressured by Alfred A. Knopf to publish his *Collected Poems* and hence reread his life's work, but the poet can only bear the pressure of this planet by inscribing another table, "The Planet on the Table." The old poet remembers as he writes and, as he remembers the value of his own earlier poems, this new table also bears the impression of Wordsworth's lines about his or the young Pedlar's education apart from books and human conversation in Book I of *The Excursion*.

This passage was first composed as part of a distinct poem as early as February–March 1798.² Although written in the third person, it is, as Jonathan Wordsworth has established, "Wordsworth's earliest sustained piece of autobiographical and philosophical writing" (378):

So the foundations of his mind were laid.
In such communion, not from terror free,
While yet a child, and long before his time,
Had he perceived the presence and the power
Of greatness; and deep feelings had impressed
So vividly great objects that they lay
Upon his mind like substances, whose presence
Perplexed the bodily sense. He had received
A precious gift; for, as he grew in years,
With these impressions would he still compare

All his remembrances, thoughts, shapes, and forms;
 And, being still unsatisfied with aught /
 Of dimmer character, he thence attained
 An active power to fasten images
 Upon his brain; and on their pictured lines
 Intensely brooded, even till they acquired
 The liveliness of dreams. (I. 132–48: 592–93)

As “deep feelings had impressed / So vividly great objects” on the Pedlar’s mind while yet a child—making him “still unsatisfied with aught / Of dimmer character”—so Stevens “thence attained / An active power to fasten images / Upon his brain; and on their pictured lines / Intensely brooded. . . .” The poem of a forgetful old man about Ariel bears the record of Wordsworth or the Pedlar in the “after-day / Of boyhood”:

many an hour in caves forlorn,
 And ’mid the hollow depths of naked crags
 He sate, and even in their fixed lineaments,
 Or from the power of a peculiar eye,
 Or by creative feeling overborne,
 Or by predominance of thought oppressed,
 Even in their fixed and steady lineaments
 He traced an ebbing and a flowing mind,
 Expression ever varying! (I. 153–62: 593)

Wordsworth’s description of how the foundations of the Pedlar’s mind were laid draws on John Locke (in *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*) and David Hartley (in *Observations on Man*). But behind these we discover Aristotle in *On Memory* and the metaphor of memory as a written surface. As Mary Carruthers elucidates, “A memory is a mental picture (phantasm; Latin *simulacrum* or *imago*) . . . which is inscribed in a physical way upon that part of the body which constitutes memory. This phantasm is the final product of the entire process of sense perception,” and “Every sort of sense perception ends up in the form of a phantasm in memory” (16–17). Aristotle says, “[T]he change that occurs marks [the body] in a sort of imprint, as it were, of the sense-image, as people do who seal things with signet-rings” (450a 25: 50).

Wordsworth’s lines are impressed on Stevens’ poem in the same manner as deep feelings had impressed great objects or natural forms on the Pedlar’s mind. In this way the two poems are in creative conversation, and, as Wordsworth expounds in Book VII of his 1805 *Prelude*, “Attention comes, / And comprehensiveness and memory, / From early converse with the works of God” (VII. 716–18: 292). The speaker of “The Planet on the Table” contends, “Other makings of the sun / Were waste and welter.” But the poem attends to Wordsworth’s other making of the sun, “The

Pedlar," as it remembers for the forgetful old poet the surging welter of the boy's mood, tracing "an ebbing and a flowing mind" in the waste region of his cave. Stevens' poem "being still unsatisfied with aught / Of dimmer character" bears the poverty of the "fixed lineaments," the "fixed and steady lineaments," of Wordsworth's verse as "Some lineament or character" with "Expression ever varying" during the turning of creative or affluent conversation. Wordsworth's poem survives in Stevens' poem in the same manner as the character and lineaments of nature have influenced the Pedlar. The two poems in creative conversation make of each other "A precious gift," which we receive when we discover such affluence in the poverty of their words.

Stevens has not learned Wordsworth by heart, that is, by rote, but parts of *The Excursion* are impressed on his heart, if we conceive of his memory as a tablet inscribed by deep feelings with images like letters or pictured lines. Wordsworth's lines lay like substances upon Stevens' mind "and almost seemed / To haunt the bodily sense" in the same manner as the tables of his poems bear "Some lineament or character" of the planet of which they were part.³ As Carruthers explains:

A work is not truly read until one has made it part of oneself. . . . Merely running one's eyes over the written pages is not reading at all, for the writing must be transferred into memory, from graphemes on parchment or papyrus or paper to images written in one's brain by emotion and sense. (10)

This way of remembering almost disposes of books until they become mnemonics, provisioning the memory. As Thomas Aquinas says, "A thing is said metaphorically to be written upon the mind of anyone when it is firmly held in the memory. . . . For things are written down in material books to help the memory" (I. Q. 24, a I: 133–34). Then the poems Stevens carefully notes Ariel "had written" become a store of reminders, and we can wonder at the difference between a manuscript or book on the table and the table, book, and volume of the brain. As the character and lineaments of Wordsworth's lines impress upon Stevens' "Some lineament or character," we brood upon the nature of "pictured lines" as lines of verse are stored in "images written in one's brain by emotion and sense."

We cannot picture a lineament or character, although we might dispose of each word etymologically. Thus, the line that delineates "lineament" in Stevens' poem forms the contour of a barely sketched body becoming "character." But like the character or part of Ariel, this recedes out of human form into a letter or a stamp or impress, until, etymologically, "character" exists as a sharp furrow or groove, persisting finally as a tool for marking or engraving that can be discarded into disuse, just as one would throw away a quill or break one's staff as Prospero does (Shakespeare, *The Tempest* 5.1.54: 1186) before drowning the book or *Collected Poems*. But then,

in the turning of the verse, "Some affluence" causes these divergent meanings to flow toward, etymologically and punningly, a mysterious profusion or exuberance in a paradoxical economy of poverty and gain: at once replenishing and emptying out a grand storehouse of memory. It is this affluence—as poems congregate or literally flow toward each other in conversation within the treasury of the memory—that allows Stevens' poem to trace "an ebbing and a flowing mind, / Expression ever varying," thus generating creative conversation with Wordsworth's lines.

Can we determine that Stevens is consciously remembering Wordsworth? Or are his poems, as he follows the track to a forgetful old age, somehow recollecting for him? How do these questions bear upon our own memory and explication of Stevens as we come after? Stevens bears upon belated interpretation in the same way as he half-looks before to earlier poems. In this way the poet carefully leaves us something, which we can half-perceive in a more accurate manner. Can we think of this "something" as the relation poems bear toward each other?

Bearing these questions in mind, we turn from one memory model to another, from the tablet to the storehouse. The two models are interrelated. Thus we turn from the table to the mansion in order to consider the architectural mnemonic, or the places-and-images memory scheme, in its fullest sense. It is important to remember with Carruthers,

Whereas the metaphor of the seal-in-wax or written tablets was a model for the process of making the memorial phantasm and storing it in a place in the memory, this second metaphor refers both to the contents of such a memory and to its internal organization. (33)

"The Planet on the Table" says of other poems, "It was not important that they survive." But the creative conversation between Stevens and Wordsworth turns about the injunction, "Remember me!" Hamlet's immediate response to this parting command of his father's spirit has recourse to our first memory model. But Shakespeare also allows us a punning glimpse of the second:

Remember thee?
Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat
In this distracted globe. Remember thee?
Yea, from the table of my memory
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
That youth and observation copied there,
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain
Unmixed with baser matter. (*Hamlet* 1.5.95–104: 662)

What matters in the creative conversation between Wordsworth and Stevens is the mixing of the reminder to create with the “baser matter” of memory, which calls into question the relation between “book and volume” and “brain.” During the remembering and writing of poems in such gregarious disquisition, each poet inscribes on the table of his memory what Hamlet would “wipe away” from his: “all trivial fond records, / All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past”—the “remembered time” or the “something seen that he liked,” along with the saws and lines from books that poems bear. But Hamlet’s description of the table of his memory makes us ask again: Where had “youth and observation copied” for Wordsworth and Stevens? Where does memory function during their creative conversation across the generations? As each poet opens “the book and volume” of the other’s brain, where are they conversing?

Shakespeare’s triple pun on “globe” enlarges Stevens’ “Planet,” so that his poems are not just copied out of his head by youth and observation as a store of reminders, provisioning his memory against a forgetful old age. We half-perceive Stevens’ “Planet” as a microcosm because his poems collected together constitute an epitome of our world. But his poems also partake of a community of spirits, wandering beyond us as they turn themselves about in a conversation that cuts through the generations, motioning in the same manner as the lines Shakespeare had written for the players to speak in the Globe Theatre, as long as memory holds a seat in that distracted place. One imagines Richard Burbage remembering his lines by using the architecture of the Globe as a mnemonic. But does Shakespeare call memory into the Globe so that other generations can attend his theater? Was it important for him that his plays survive? As we come from the future to hold our seat as memory in the Globe, partaking of Shakespeare’s dramatic distraction by conversing with his characters, we find the theater, the playwright’s memory place, is at once enlarged and vanished. The conversation between Wordsworth and Stevens takes place in another kind of memory-building as each poet responds to the other’s ghost and the farewell exhortation, “Remember me!”

Toward the end of “Tintern Abbey,” Wordsworth turns to his sister. During this transition Wordsworth is composing and remembering his poem as he is walking back from the Wye valley to Bristol, conveying his poem to Joseph Cottle for publication in *Lyrical Ballads*⁴:

Therefore let the moon
Shine on thee in thy solitary walk;
And let the misty mountain-winds be free
To blow against thee: and, in after years,
When these wild ecstasies shall be matured
Into a sober pleasure; when thy mind
Shall be a mansion for all lovely forms,
Thy memory be as a dwelling-place

For all sweet sounds and harmonies; oh! then,
If solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief,
Should be thy portion, with what healing thoughts
Of tender joy wilt thou remember me,
And these my exhortations! (135–46: 165)

Wordsworth builds for Dorothy her future mind, which is also her memory, as a mansion. Mansion is glossed by the poet within his poem as “a dwelling-place” and this explication draws out the Latin root of mansion, *manere*, “to remain or dwell.” These “Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour, July 13, 1798” have not been etched on the bark of a sycamore in the Wye valley, but inscribed instead on tables arranged in the mansion or storehouse of the poet’s mind. During the final lines, as Wordsworth bequeaths his composition, Dorothy’s mind or memory mansion becomes the place for these remains as long as she remains alive.

It is during this transition that Wordsworth’s prayer turns into a conversation poem in the manner of Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight,” a poem (composed only five months earlier) with which it is also in conversation. Wordsworth did not voice his exhortations for mere amusement or as a distraction, and now he elevates poetry-making to something approaching the art of dialectic, so that the poem he writes addresses the cause of Milton’s Adam’s “desire / By conversation with his like to help, / Or solace his defects” (VIII. 418–19). Dorothy’s response is not recorded within the poem. But I believe “Tintern Abbey” truly becomes a conversation poem when Stevens calls to mind Wordsworth’s exhortations from across the generations and the Atlantic, in turn, allowing the earlier poet to re-join with a greater voice than he knew. We hear Wordsworth’s voice in creative conversation with Stevens’ “A Postcard from the Volcano.”

Stevens composed this poem in the mid-1930s and it was first collected in the 1936 Knopf edition of *Ideas of Order*. Wordsworth’s fiat, “And let the misty mountain-winds be free / To blow against thee,” is realized half-way through the first line of the fourth stanza as a fated mansion in a windswept landscape is created out of Wordsworth’s imagining of his sister’s future mind as a mansion:

The spring clouds blow
Above the shuttered mansion-house,
Beyond our gate and the windy sky

Cries out a literate despair.
We knew for long the mansion’s look
And what we said of it became

A part of what it is . . . Children,

Still weaving budded aureoles,
Will speak our speech and never know,

Will say of the mansion that it seems
As if he that lived there left behind
A spirit storming in blank walls,

A dirty house in a gutted world,
A tatter of shadows peaked to white,
Smeared with the gold of the opulent sun. (*CPP* 128–29)

In this way, Stevens sends us a postcard, which we can return to Wordsworth as he inscribes with inward touch his epitaphic poem of remains. Let us imagine Stevens and Wordsworth with each other in the mansion as it is altered during what Keats called “the general and gregarious advance of intellect” (90) across the generations. We understand creative conversation within these altered coordinates of persons, place, and time, altering the condition of our domestic conversations. The conversation within this mansion and between the two poets takes many turns, as each poem at once explicates and deepens the other. Both poets are consumed with what Andrew Bennett has called “the proleptic future-anterior sense that we will have left something” (12–13). What else can we, as children coming after, say of the mansion as we look before to Stevens’ dark prolepsis in conversation with Wordsworth’s performance of memorialization in “Tintern Abbey”?

Stevens’ poem plays on the etymology of mansion in an apocalyptic manner, making remains out of where we would remain. In John 14, Jesus promises “In domo Patris mei mansiones multae sunt” (*Secundum Iohannem* 14:2), which Tyndale renders literally as “In my fathers housse are many mansions” (*John* 14:2). Wordsworth’s mansion is such a resting place within a large house. Stevens enlarges but then shuts Wordsworth’s abiding place so that the two of them might converse within and about what remains. Their creative conversation at once stretches the lifetime of our domestic conversations across the generations and determines our time by shattering it against death. If we desire to enter the mansion as children and converse with Stevens and Wordsworth, the question is whether interpretation, which comes after, can bide the time of such intergenerational dialogue as it turns itself away from us.

Aquinas’ many memories are concatenated in the mansion of his memory so that, as E. K. Rand describes, he can draw on them when he composes: “St. Thomas has learned from many men of wisdom, but on the present occasion they are summoned to court, summoned from their chambers in his mind” (61). Stevens calls on Wordsworth (and others) in the same manner in “A Postcard from the Volcano” and “The Planet on the Table” when the occasion comes for him to talk about forgetfulness

across the generations and the question of how poems will live on—that is, if they survive at all.

Stevens draws Wordsworth into a harsh conversation, which begins by shuttering the very memory chamber or mansion from which he has summoned his poetic ancestor. Stevens' poem then seems to undermine Wordsworth's grandest affirmation of the one life in "Tintern Abbey":

For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity,
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. (89–103: 164)

"A Postcard from the Volcano" degrades Wordsworth's "A motion and a spirit, that impels" by re-imagining this power of greatness as "A spirit storming in blank walls," which is no more than the ghost of the dead poet "Doomed for a certain term to walk the [house]" (*Hamlet* 1.5.10: 661). This ghost is "A spirit storming in blank [verse],"⁵ since Stevens' poem desecrates Wordsworth as a poet reluctant to leave the world of his poem. Thus, Stevens shuts an inheritance only partially bequeathed and hence haunted in order to exorcize Wordsworth's ghost and so that "Tintern Abbey" can become a poem of dark but greater passages than its maker knows. All the time we must remember that, as Stevens was a child after Wordsworth, so are we Stevens' children. Does it follow that Stevens' poem calls us into its creative conversation with Wordsworth? This conversation questions whether our days and the generations are bound each to each by natural piety. But can criticism learn from Stevens' relation with Wordsworth? We heed Stevens' dark prolepsis, which in fact looks before as much as after, when we attend to the relation between poems.

As the conversation turns itself about in this manner within the enlarged but ruined metaphor of memory as a mansion, it also unfolds as what Stevens termed "pure explication de texte," his "principal form of piety" (*L* 793). During this unfolding of the conversation, each poem is brooding intensely on the other and we are "well pleased" to recognize "the language of the sense" as Wordsworth's lines impress themselves on

Stevens' poem. The language of the sense is that in which Wordsworth recognizes the soul of all his moral being during the climax of "Tintern Abbey":

Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods,
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth; of all the mighty world
Of eye, and ear,—both what they half-create,
And what perceive; well pleased to recognise
In nature and the language of the sense
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being. (103–12: 164–65)

Socrates believed written words are incapable of speaking in their own support and incapable of adequately teaching what is true. The creative conversation between Stevens and Wordsworth says otherwise in its care for the writing down of the language of the sense. After Wordsworth's grand "And I have felt," "A Postcard from the Volcano" understands that what we left at what we felt can become as dilapidated and indecipherable as an anagram if we do not carefully attend to the relation between poems across the generations. Yet, as Stevens assures us between stanzas three and four, "We left much more, left what still is / The look of things, left what we felt / At what we saw."

Stevens' concern is with "What mattered," as in "The Planet on the Table." "What mattered was" that "I have felt a presence" and that poems "should bear / Some lineament or character" "of all the mighty world / Of eye, and ear,—both what they half-create, / And what perceive." "Some affluence" is such half-creating and perceiving during the making and remembering of poems "if only half-perceived, / In the poverty of their words." What matters when Stevens thus modulates Wordsworth in "The Planet on the Table" is that "Tintern Abbey" becomes a great object.

As Stevens' "half-perceived" in "The Planet on the Table" turns about Wordsworth's "half-create / And what perceive," a relation is established, which Lucy Newlyn believes Wordsworth intends, "between nature's formative influence over [Wordsworth], and the influence his poetry has on the minds of his readers" (127). As Wordsworth's repeated "what"—"both what they half-create, / And what perceive"—bears upon the five instances of "what" in "A Postcard from the Volcano," we consider the matter of Wordsworth's poem and what matters as it is impressed on the table of Stevens' memory. The "what" repeated five times in Stevens' poem provisions the poet's memory during the act of composition. As one poem bears upon another, Wordsworth is summoned from the mansion of Stevens' memory to talk through the forgetful generations about desuetude. How

do our feelings and the memory of perception change the look of things? How is the making of poems involved with this process, as what we said of the mansion became a part of what it is?

"The Planet on the Table" addresses these questions as it teases thought from its eight uses of "of." In the first stanza, when poems "were of a remembered time / Or of something seen that he liked," they were *from* a remembered time and *about* something seen that he liked. They were also *about* a remembered time *from* something seen that he liked. But the poem also leaps here from the objective genitive to the subjective genitive, so that it was the remembered time or the something seen that he liked that was composing the poems. Now Wordsworth's instances of "of" in "Tintern Abbey" talk back to us through Stevens' poem and we can wonder at the language of the sense: Language *from* the sense? Language *about* the sense? Language *spoken by* the sense? Or language spoken by *what we sense*, "Wakening a sort of thought in sense" (as Shelley believes in "Peter Bell the Third" [IV. x. 312: 353])?

We bear in mind the matter of the language of the sense. Behind Stevens' "What mattered was" in "The Planet on the Table," what matters, what is important, is the Latin obtrusion, *materia*: the building material that can bear—the stuff of which poems are made—the language that is vitally metaphorical because it bears the before unapprehended relation of things. Of what is this matter? In philosophical use, matter is in contradistinction to mind or to form, although matter is also subject matter. In remembering the language of the sense, creative conversation forges ahead to transform something that exists only as it withdraws from our perceptual and phenomenological grasp, returning upon and re-energizing what has come before.

Wordsworth writes, "for the sake / Of youthful Poets, who among these hills / Will be my second self when I am gone" ("Michael" 37–39: 104). "Among the second selves" (CPP 456), Stevens prophesies that "Children, / Still weaving budded aureoles, / Will speak our speech and never know." Stevens knows that Wordsworth's "second self" is in conversation with black night, "Death's second self, that seals up all in rest" (Shakespeare, Sonnet 73.8: 760). The creative conversation between Wordsworth and Stevens discovers for us the time of this two-folded "second self" as figures of speech are turned beyond the service of the time being. Creative conversations between poems across the generations bear upon our domestic conversations, which matter, solacing our defects. What is the relation between literature—or the laying up of a store of reminders—and the way we are with certain people in a certain place across a certain span of time? Our ordinary relations also bear upon our interpretation of literature. This means it is possible to recognize the soul of all our moral being in the laying down of the language of the sense by poems as they also converse. As "children" of Stevens and Wordsworth, we come with black night as their second self, and this makes our burden heavy. If we are

benighted, we benight these two poets. We must remember their relation and become part of this conversation, which we half-perceive in a more accurate manner.

By attending to Stevens' creative conversations, we discover the poet laying a table in a mansion as if for a banquet of poets, with whom we shall sit down to dine and converse. One evening the roof collapsed on a similar banquet hall. Simonides, the only guest to leave before the calamity, was able to reconstruct the guest list by recalling each person's seat at the table.⁶ As we sit down for supper at the table Stevens lays, under the remains of the ruinous roof of his shuttered mansion, remembering and conversing with him and the poets he has summoned from other chambers in his memory, we discover what he lays upon the table. We find that he leaves a record for the present, as a legislative or deliberative body might, subject to its being considered or called upon at a subsequent time, perhaps after supper when the roof will have collapsed. By attending to Stevens in creative conversation, we bide our time because we understand that it will have been sharply determined. We sit down to a banquet with poets, at once remembering we shall die and waiting patiently as we converse, for consideration of their proposed measures. Interpretation must discover how to enter this time of creative conversation.

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Notes

¹ Helen Vendler talks of "A Postcard from the Volcano" and "The Planet on the Table" as Stevens' "two bequest-poems" (32). I am interested in the manner in which Stevens inherits Wordsworth's bequest of the language of the sense in these two poems.

² The earliest version of the poem was referred to as "The Pedlar" by S. T. Coleridge and Dorothy Wordsworth. It is included together with an account of its complicated textual history in an appendix to Jonathan Wordsworth's *The Borders of Vision* (378–87). The revised version of "The Pedlar," as it became part of Book I of *The Excursion*, is the only text that would have been available to Stevens. But Wordsworth made only small revisions to earlier versions of the above passage.

³ I am quoting from the earliest version of the separate *The Pedlar*: "and deep feelings had impressed / Great objects on his mind with portraiture / And colour so distinct that on his mind / They lay like substances, and almost seemed / To haunt the bodily sense" (*Borders of Vision* 30–34: 380–81).

⁴ The Duke of Argyle wrote to the Rev. T. S. Howson in September 1848 that Wordsworth "told us he had written *Tintern Abbey* in 1798, taking four days to compose it, the last 20 lines or so being composed as he walked down the hill from Clifton to Bristol" (qtd. in Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems* 357).

⁵ I am indebted to Bart Eeckhout's reading of this line during the course of editing this article.

⁶ For the story of Simonides' discovery of the principles of the mnemonic technique of putting images in an architectural background, see Cicero, *De oratore* (Book II).

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Stevens in the Marriage of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes

DIANE MIDDLEBROOK

DURING THE 1970s, the English poet Ted Hughes agreed to be interviewed for a book-length commentary on his poetics by a young critic, Ekbert Faas. Hughes did not normally grant interviews, but Faas had won his confidence by focusing his critical eye on Hughes's most recent publication, *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow* (1972). Once Hughes warmed up, he became unusually forthcoming about his sources and methods and about the influence of other poets on his work. Faas, apparently encouraged by Hughes's helpful attitude, ventured to bring up the name of Sylvia Plath. Her death by suicide after separating from Hughes in 1962 had made their relationship a touchy subject on which to address the poet, but Faas tactfully kept a tight focus on the question of their tastes in poetry:

Faas: One would have thought that *she* would have introduced you to American poetry. . . .

Hughes: Well, her knowledge of American poetry was pretty extensive. But she didn't have strong preferences except maybe for Wallace Stevens.

Faas: How strange! And she hardly mentions him at all. According to *Letters Home* [Plath's published correspondence], Lowell and Roethke were the only poets of their generation you both really admired.

Hughes: Well, she came to Roethke rather late.

Faas: After you had given her his *Words for the Wind* in 1959.

Hughes: Reading Lowell in 1958 had really set her off to break through whatever blocks there were. And then suddenly at Yaddo she was isolated, reading Roethke. At first she plundered him directly but then developed her own style out of it. But all along, though with a growing scepticism, she preserved her admiration for Wallace Stevens. He was a kind of god to her, while I could never see anything at all in him except magniloquence. Her early poetry is Wallace Stevens almost every other line. (Faas 210)

Anyone who knows the early work of Sylvia Plath might well share Faas's surprise at hearing it had been shaped in any way by reading Wallace Stevens. But that demur—"How strange!"—illustrates the misplaced self-confidence with which critics sometimes identify influence. Despite the efforts of Harold Bloom to theorize this concept rigorously in *The Anxiety of Influence*, the term remains conceptually loose and baggy in literary-critical usage. Admittedly, poetic influence is usually quite indirect in its expression, a matter of what might best be described as imaginative affiliation. It can, however, usefully be distinguished from quotation, allusion, imitation, and other direct evocations of literary precursors.

In the work Plath wrote before 1960 that was included in *Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems*, it is easy to identify the poets Plath chose to imitate: they are W. H. Auden and W. B. Yeats, not Wallace Stevens. Like Auden and Yeats, Plath writes formal rhymed stanzas, in which the metaphorical content is directly rationalized. That is, her poems have a point to make, and she is teaching herself how to make it by mimicking the poetic voices of her models.

Nonetheless, evidence of Plath's admiration for Stevens can be found, both in her writing and in the extensive archive of the notes and papers preserved in her archives at the Lilly Library, Indiana University. The latter show that Plath's enthusiasm for Stevens dates back to courses she took at Smith College during 1953–54, on American literature given by Newton Arvin and on modern poetry taught by Elizabeth A. Drew.

Arvin's course was a historical survey, in which Stevens' poetry was included as one of the contributors to the "revolution carried out in poetic language" in the twentieth century, according to Plath's notes.¹ But Drew had published widely in the field of modern poetry, and her course was heavily weighted with assignments in the poetry and prose of Wallace Stevens; it also included substantial reading in published criticism of Stevens' work. Drew prepared numerous mimeographed handouts of all three: poetry, prose, and criticism; these seem to have taken the place of a textbook in the course. Plath annotated the handouts liberally, in black ink from a pen with a wide nib: underlining, and adding brackets, exclamation points, and five-pointed stars in the margins next to favorite passages.

Comments on Stevens' poetics especially caught Plath's eye, suggesting that she approached Stevens, and critical commentary on Stevens, in part for what she could learn from them about writing poetry. A note, possibly from one of Drew's lectures, to which Plath awarded two stars, characterizes Stevens' work as "more a collection of images & incantations than . . . a description of a point of view, & the pleasure we get from reading it is more sensuous than intellectual." Another note she underlined deals with the phenomenon of synaesthesia in Stevens' work: "an idea merges with a color, a thought with an odor or perfume." On the handout drawn from Stevens' "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,"

Plath set three exclamation marks and a star alongside Stevens' claim that the poet is a "potent figure" who "gives to life the *supreme fictions* without which we are unable to conceive of it."²

Plath also marked up passages from a few of Stevens' poems, including, significantly, "Sunday Morning." Plath's response to "Sunday Morning" apparently led to the composition of her own "Morning in the Hospital Solarium," an undated poem published in the "*Juvenilia*" section of Plath's *Collected Poems*. Here is, first, the opening of Stevens' "Sunday Morning":

Complacencies of the peignoir, and late
Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
And the green freedom of a cockatoo
Upon a rug mingle to dissipate
The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.
She dreams a little, and she feels the dark
Encroachment of that old catastrophe. . . . (CPP 53)

Here is an excerpt from section II of the poem, which Plath bracketed on her handout:

Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,
In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else
In any balm or beauty of the earth,
Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?
(CPP 53)

And here is part of the end of the poem:

At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
Downward to darkness, on extended wings. (CPP 56)

Plath's "Morning in the Hospital Solarium" echoes Stevens overtly, if satirically:

Sunlight strikes a glass of grapefruit juice,
flaring green through philodendron leaves
in this surrealistic house
of pink and beige, impeccable bamboo,
patronized by convalescent wives;
heat shadows waver noiseless in
bright window-squares until the women seem
to float like dream-fish in the languid limbo
of an undulant aquarium.

Morning: another day, and talk
taxi indolent on whispered wheels. . . .

Like petulant parakeets corked up in cages
of intricate spunglass routine,
the women wait, fluttering, turning pages
of magazines in elegant ennui,
hoping for some incredible dark man
to assault the scene and make some
gaudy miracle occur. . . . (Plath, *Collected Poems* 332–33)

Plath's poem appears to be an intentional parody of "Sunday Morning," with the religious context of female anomie in Stevens replaced by a medical context. Yet the situation of women in classy boudoir and high-end sanatorium is strikingly similar. It is announced by the echo of "Morning" in Plath's title and by her poem's allusions to the "languid limbo" and "elegant ennui" of the women's existential state. Interestingly, Plath employs free verse rather than the blank verse Stevens uses in "Sunday Morning"; as a consequence, her "Morning in the Hospital Solarium" sounds rhythmically nothing like "Sunday Morning." Instead, Plath has been influenced by Stevens' subject matter and by the lexicon of "Sunday Morning," "undulant" being the most obvious borrowing, though many other kinds of echoes abound such as "oranges"/"grapefruit," "cockatoo"/"parakeet," the significant adjective "dark," the figure of an anticipated male redeemer, and so forth.

But let us not confuse parodic imitation with "influence": perhaps a better word would be "homage." The true presence of Stevens' influence lies elsewhere in this poem, in what I earlier called "imaginative affiliation." One of Plath's affiliations is with Stevens' disposition to be pictorial; on the handout of "Poem Written at Morning" that she received in her course with Drew, Plath underlined the lines, "By metaphor you paint / A thing. . . . The senses paint / By metaphor" (*CPP* 198). Much of Plath's early poetry, too, is pictorial, and full of color terminology that carries metaphorical weight. A poem titled "Black Pine Tree in an Orange Light" (undated, *Juvenilia*), for example, seems to draw its inspiration directly from such color-inflected poems by Stevens as "Domination of Black" and "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"—in particular section X ("At the sight of blackbirds / Flying in a green light, / Even the bawds of euphony / Would cry out sharply" [*CPP* 76]):

Tell me what you see in it:
the pine tree like a Rorschach-blot
black against the orange light. . . .
(Plath, *Collected Poems* 328)

When Plath directly echoes her master in “Morning in the Hospital Solarium,” it is by specifying the “flaring green” with which the philodendron leaves endow the sunlight, one of the effects that apparently justifies her adjective “surrealistic” to characterize the atmosphere of the room in which the women loll.

Another aspect of Stevens that shows up in the work of Plath is what might be described as *floridity*, by which Plath reveals that she has absorbed from her fellow New Englander a fantasy about torrid geographical zones. Plath’s college notebook—and the copy of Stevens’ *Collected Poems* she acquired later—indicate close reading of Stevens’ “Concerning the Thunderstorms of Yucatan” (from “The Comedian as the Letter C”), “Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock,” “The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws,” “Academic Discourse at Havana,” “O, Florida, Venereal Soil,” “Stars at Tallapoosa,” “Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery,” and “The Idea of Order at Key West,” all of which throng with tropical imagery. An example in Plath’s work is “Southern Sunrise” (1956), which concerns her first visit to the South of France. The poem exemplifies both the Stevensian elements of natural color and pictorial interest:

Color of lemon, mango, peach,
These storybook villas
Still dream behind
Shutters, their balconies
Fine as hand-
Made lace, or a leaf-and-flower pen-sketch.

.....
Pineapple-barked,
A green crescent of palms
Sends up its forked
Firework of fronds.

A quartz-clear dawn
Inch by bright inch
Gilds all our Avenue,
And out of the blue drench
Of Angels’ Bay
Rises the round red watermelon sun.

(Plath, *Collected Poems* 26)

Appetite is signified here in images that make objects in the landscape look good enough to eat, and the lexicon of these desirable foods has appeared in Stevens. That pineapple was surely inspired by “Poem Written at Morning”—of which Plath took special notice, as we have seen—as well as by the metaphors Stevens plays with in his “Someone Puts a Pineapple

Together," section III. And that watermelon: Was it pinched from Stevens' "Hymn from a Watermelon Pavilion," aping its jubilant ending?

You dweller in the dark cabin,
Rise, since rising will not waken,
And hail, cry hail, cry hail. (CPP 72)

Finally, and very importantly, in some of his best-known poems, Stevens makes frequent use of a feminine point of view that carries a positive valence. "Sunday Morning" is a good example—as is the beautiful late poem, "The World as Meditation." But it is to an excerpt from "The Idea of Order at Key West" that Plath responded most emphatically:

It was her voice that made
The sky acutest at its vanishing.
She measured to the hour its solitude.
She was the *single artificer of the world*
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was *the maker.*
(CPP 106; emphases Plath's)

Plath put a strong bracket at this stanza, and wrote in the margin "power of poet." Was she identifying her own vocation in Stevens' lines? Stevens is quite unlike other modernists, including Auden and Yeats, in his use of female symbolisms, so that his representations of female subjectivity may well have been important for Plath, who, during the years Hughes refers to, was investigating the male-dominant literary canon for what might be generative for her own writing. As I argue in *Her Husband: Hughes and Plath, a Marriage*, the birth of their children and the maturation of her poetic talent caused Plath to rethink the value to her art of the male modernist poets she had begun by emulating (see Chapter Six, "Separating"). At the end of her life she was subjecting female symbolisms to intense scrutiny. Deconstructing them in vivid imagery was the way she placed her own imprint on the modern poetry we study today. In her last and greatest poems, *she is the maker*, the single artificer of the world in which she sings.

My purpose in offering these brief examples is to show that the influence of Stevens on Plath is not at all obvious, but can be detected in work written during a period in Plath's development of which Hughes was an authoritative and a close, even jealous, witness. Hughes was a good literary critic, but it was the poet in Hughes who was remarking on this influence, not the critic. Disapprovingly, Hughes calls Stevens "magniloquent." One knows what he means and can concede that certain mannerisms in

Stevens' work could easily have exercised a bad influence on a young poet—though in Plath's case, they did not. Still, Hughes had been wary of it, and that was what he chose to remember. Notably, when he and Plath left England in July 1957 to take up teaching jobs in Massachusetts, Hughes gave what were probably Plath's copies of Auden and Stevens to his sister rather than including them in the large collection of books they were packing as luggage.³ Nonetheless, a heavily underlined copy of Wallace Stevens' *Collected Poems* (1954) can be found among Plath's papers at Smith College. Its presence suggests that Plath continued to read Stevens throughout her short life as a poet, despite her husband's reservations.

Like Ted Hughes, the authors of the essays in this section on British poetry after Stevens—Michael Schmidt, Gareth Reeves, and William V. Davis—are poet-critics, too: that is to say, poets first. Critical training provides a set of methodologies through which influences may be ascertained. But experience is the better teacher.

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Notes

¹ "Notes for English 321b at Smith College," Sylvia Plath Collection, Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College.

² Notebook labeled "Modern Poetry Unit—Miss Drew," Sylvia Plath MSS, Lilly Library. Emphasis Plath's.

³ Ted Hughes, letter to Olwyn Hughes, n.d. [June 1957], Olwyn Hughes papers box 1, folder 4, Emory University.

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Wallace Stevens: Arranging, Deepening, Enchanting Britain

MICHAEL SCHMIDT

SOON AFTER I FIRST came to Britain, I read a review in *Le Monde* of a concert of Benjamin Britten's music at Lyons. The critic complained that there was "too much content" in the works played. At the time I thought this complaint absurd. Yet it has a certain resonance for me now, when there is such insistence from contemporary British critics and polemicists that poems should "be *about*," should make sense of people's lives and experience, should console and be of some sort of *use*.

In an important sense, Wallace Stevens is of no use at all. Although some American critics were originally exasperated by *Harmonium*, there were readers in Britain who responded differently, who understood the attempted enchantment of his poems. The most eloquent early critic, writing in *The New Age* on August 7, 1924, was a man whose poetry was eventually so ballasted with content that it almost sank. The critic was C. M. Grieve, writing under his given name rather than his "nom de plume et de guerre" Hugh MacDiarmid, adopted in 1922 for polemical purposes.

Grieve talks of Stevens' "incessant efforts" that "provide a spectacle unique in contemporary literature—a series of unparalleled efforts, conceived with an adroitness that borders on the miraculous, to surprise the heavens out of their last shreds of obscurantism as on the terrestrial plain one might seek to frighten an enemy out of his skin or devastate a virgin with what Peter Hille calls 'the horrifying fable / So gracious and so wild' " (178). Most important, he seemed to hear Stevens in a particular way. He speaks of the "slow motion" of the verse "that does not permit the tiniest absurdity, the most elusive impossibilism, to escape." It is important to bear in mind how MacDiarmid, a Scot who was not a natural ironist, *heard* those curious lines of *Harmonium*.

MacDiarmid talks in metaphors and images rather than using analytical tools. So does Llewellyn Powys, quoted at length by MacDiarmid. Powys was writing in *The Dial* a month before, in July 1924. His metaphors are wild but apposite, built out of Stevens' own language. He insists that we cannot read Stevens "without feeling that we are being initiated into the quintessential tapering expression of a unique personality"—"How high that highest candle lights the dark" (*CPP* 444), as Stevens

was to write later in "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour"—"a personality as original and authentic as it is fastidious and calculating." He elaborates a wonderful metaphor: "[L]istening to his poetry is like listening to the humming cadences of an inspired daddy-longlegs akimbo in sunset light against the coloured planes of a sanct window above a cathedral altar" (qtd. in Grieve 180). This sounds a bit eccentric, but all the elements are there: listening, the regularity of the versification, the inspiration, the remoteness in kind, the bright colors intensified by evening, the irreligious voice using the religious setting and its tropes.

Powys especially relishes "Cortège for Rosenbloom":

It is the infants of misanthropes
And the infants of nothingness
That tread
The wooden ascents
Of the ascending of the dead.

It is turbans they wear
And boots of fur
As they tread the boards
In a region of frost,
Viewing the frost. (CPP 63)

Such writing was bound to appeal to the Celt in Llewellyn Powys. His own rhetoric is elaborately domestic, furnished in a demotic style but responsive to the high church strains of Stevens' modernism because it moved and danced and tapered without insisting on any *impossibles* to test our belief.

The Grieve who would become MacDiarmid makes a kind of litany of Stevens' titles and suggests that they themselves "connect Stevens with the Sitwells, and Lord Dunsany, and the art of S. H. Sime" (181). This was not, at the time, a particularly damaging collocation. More damaging would have been another connection, with Swinburne, though that was surely in T. S. Eliot's mind when, less out of jealousy or rivalry than as a matter of judgment, he refused to include Stevens on the Faber list for so many decades. It was for him a matter of prosody and of the fakeness of the content he detected, the religious tones, the sham epiphanies: the gaudiness.

If we look at *Sangshaw*, MacDiarmid's collection published in 1925, which he was working on while he was reading Stevens' first book, is there any evidence of Stevens' impact? Perhaps an influence can be traced in the poems in Scots that he was busy with while reading Stevens, in that near nonsense that is in fact reinvention, in the intense lyric prosody of those poems, in their insistently religious themes. There are lots of birds in those poems too, made strange: some are pecking in the yard, others are musical and skybound. Those poems, even the taut lyrics, also require to be read in slow motion and insist, as it were, on a paced and pacing music of

delivery. There is in MacDiarmid a full use of the vocalic elements as well—and surely of all the great modernists Stevens is the most vocalic, perhaps the most purely attentive vocalic poet since Tennyson or Swinburne.

Those early British readers, a Scot and a Welshman, heard Stevens as part of a known tradition that included Emerson and Whitman; they were used to the scale of his concepts and the manner of his conceptualizing. They understood too that there was (as for Emerson and Whitman) something richly provisional that made it possible for a poem to remain continuous with its process, freeing it from the contingencies of specific authorship or specific context. It was a walking out carefully, but bravely, onto ice. It was risk, the chance of failure, the unequal chance of success.

And then, to quote the Ezra Pound of the *Pisan Cantos*, “for 180 years almost nothing” (Canto LXXXI, 534). That is, at least the publication of *Harmonium* and its reception did not guarantee that it got around very widely in Britain. In the next three decades Stevens fell from view. Or rather, he fell from favor. He was read by Nicholas Moore, by the poets of the New Apocalypse, by Norman MacCaig and W. S. Graham and George Barker, by Dylan Thomas; and his curious enchantment wrecked many a poet whose voice and ear were not strong enough to resist the siren that Stevens quite clearly can be. He claimed, for preference, not to read either Eliot or Pound for fear of unconscious influence: “I am not conscious of having been influenced by anybody and have purposely held off from reading highly mannered people like Eliot and Pound so that I should not absorb anything, even unconsciously” (L 813). But many a poet was taken over by Stevens: Nicholas Moore and Jack Beeching, it seems to me, are two talented poets who, for a time at least, fell under his wheels.

So I am puzzled, given that Stevens was read by other poets right through the thirties and forties, that there is such an air of surprised discovery in Donald Davie’s 1953 review in *Twentieth Century* of the *Selected Poems* issued by Faber and the competing volume issued by Fortune Press in the previous year. Davie, just like the poets of the 1940s, but unlike MacDiarmid and Powys, crucially mishears Stevens, and in mishearing him misvalues or mislocates him in that early review.¹ He returned to Stevens later, and his sense of the poet altered, though in the end he rather lost interest in him.

It is hard for the specifically English ear not to mishear Stevens, not to read in him a relatively regular iambulator. But his own recorded readings transform the English reader’s sense of the poet and may indeed affect other readers. The prosody Stevens’ voice locates—there is nothing imposed about it, a prosody inherent in the composition, in the way the words assembled in his mind’s ear—can be distinctive, and hearing its originality changes the nature of the charm of Stevens’ verse. One realizes that the metrical poison so many poets imbibe with their Stevens is not *his* poison, but one of their own invention, or their own conditioned expectation, due to the deceptively familiar surface of his poems.

The first time I listened to Stevens' 1954 recording of "The Idea of Order at Key West" the scales fell from my ears. Each line seemed to be endowed (in a quite unmechanical way) not with one but with two caesurae. This broke the apparent tyranny of the driving iamb, creating a suspension or a stillness, changing the nature of the emphasis and climax of the line. A driving iamb might be imposed upon Stevens' verse, but it is not necessarily inherent. What is inherent is something deliberately tentative in the kinds of emphasis it gives, something specifically musical. Had Stevens been more calculating he might have considered laying out his lines in those descending, indenting triplets favored by William Carlos Williams. But his relatively orthodox lineation paradoxically enables the poem's mystery and captures its sound without self-consciousness. Here is how the poem's first stanza might be transcribed to indicate those caesurae:

She sang
 beyond the genius
 of the sea.
 The water
 never formed
 to mind or voice,
 Like a body
 wholly body,
 fluttering
 Its empty sleeves;
 and yet its
 mimic motion
 Made constant cry,
 caused constantly
 a cry,
 That was not ours
 although
 we understood,
 Inhuman,
 of the veritable ocean. (*CPP* 105)

But Stevens is nothing if not unostentatious in the presentation of his verse. Thom Gunn will take heroic couplets and put them through the Williams slicer, giving what is regular prosody the appearance of free verse, as in part four of "The Geysers" (see Gunn 242–46). In that poem, the effect is, prosodically, Stevensian in that the lines are more insistently inflected, less prey to the drumming decasyllabon. But Gunn uses the extra liberty to highlight irregularities and to disrupt syntax, to make the visual form more responsive to the dissolving theme of the poem, a poem that loosens rather than tightens toward release.

The two-caesura line in "The Idea of Order at Key West" is relatively widespread, and once we are alert to this counter-pacing, which works against the traditional expectations we have of his line lengths, we find other Stevens poems similarly taking shapes, and making shapes, even more wonderful than those we had heard hitherto. Stevens stands higher and further apart from other poets. But we can make more sense of his impact on John Ashbery, for example, who attends closely to how one might *hear* Stevens than we can his impact on Charles Tomlinson, for whom Stevens is a philosophical poet, a poet who suggests ways of seeing. Tomlinson, like many of the English poets of his generation whose example he staunchly and eloquently withstood (and despite his passion for the work of French, Spanish-language, and Italian modernists), is English in his hunger for content of a specific and identifiable kind, in his desire for "argument." His poems are seldom, like Stevens' or Ashbery's, "instances of themselves." There is always the sense that the poem is "about" something, such as those Victorian narrative paintings that never quite have the courage of their medium. Not having that courage can be a virtue in that they speak, and we remember what they say. But that other, Stevensian form of poetry compels us to remember *how* they say, foregrounding the medium, holding it up for our wonderment.

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Notes

¹Davie's failure to hear the nuances of Stevens' verse is illustrated in his comments on stanza XI of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle": "This is thoroughly late-Victorian, poor Browning or poor Meredith. Activity masquerades as agility; violence as energy; it is hectic and monotonous" (12).

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A Modernist Dialectic: Stevens and Williams in the Poetry of Charles Tomlinson

GARETH REEVES

I. INTRODUCTION

CHARLES TOMLINSON WAS one of the most “Americanized” of the British poets to come to prominence in the twenty or so years following the Second World War. As he describes in his book *Some Americans: A Period Record* (1981), his first full-scale collection (*Seeing Is Believing*, 1958) was published in New York after English publishers had rejected it (SA 13), and some feel Americans still take him to heart more readily than do the British. His relationship with American poetry is not easy to categorize, however. Most would agree with Alan Young’s assessment that Tomlinson’s poetry comes out of a productive tension between English and American, an “assimilation of some characteristics and qualities of American literary modernism to help shape a distinctively personal yet essentially English voice and vision” (67). But if the role of American modernism in Tomlinson’s poetry is generally recognized, less readily acknowledged is the extent to which his poetry is informed, indeed haunted, by the contradictions that are still being played out in the wake of that tradition. For this poet in “a state of mental emigration” (SA 12), America has provided the imaginative space to explore his own aesthetic allegiances. Nowhere is this more evident than in the presence in his poetry of those two opposed representatives of American poetic modernism, Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams.

Albert Gelpi has argued that Stevens and Williams, as representatives, respectively, of Symbolist and Imagist tendencies, enacted a dialectic central to modernist poetics. The Imagist Williams saw the work of art as assuming a place within nature, whereas the Symbolist Stevens was more concerned with the imagination’s power over external objects. This dialectic, which reflects “an ambiguity in the philosophic and linguistic assumptions of Modernism itself,” is “still unsettled” (21). It is for this reason that Tomlinson’s career is both intriguing and representative, at any rate from a British point of view, for in his poetry that dialectic is unsettlingly

present. The common view of Tomlinson, fostered by Tomlinson himself, is that an early, mistaken allegiance to Stevens gave way to a more fruitful reading of Williams. But the picture is less simple and more interesting, for one way of looking at Tomlinson's poetic career is as an attempt to exorcize the ghost of Stevens. Tomlinson's poetry demonstrates a Bloomian desire to suppress a strong Stevensian and Symbolist inclination toward an "interior" poetry that "live[s] in the mind" (*CPP* 728) in favor of a Williamsite and Imagist poetry of accurate perception.

II. TOMLINSON AND STEVENS

Not all of Tomlinson's statements about Stevens should be taken at face value. In particular, the effect of *Some Americans: A Personal Record* is to downplay the part Stevens has played in his poetic development in favor of Williams. Tomlinson "muffed the thing badly," he writes, in discovering Stevens before Williams. The implication of his account is that the kind of lesson he learned from Stevens he could have got more readily from Williams, namely an alertness to sensory perception, getting the "sharpness" of "sense experience" into his writing. This was perhaps inevitable, since at the time the only readily available collection of Stevens' poems was *Harmonium* (lent him by "an American friend")—Stevens' British *Selected Poems* was not published until 1953, two years after the time Tomlinson is describing. Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," writes Tomlinson, "led me for a while to look from different angles at separate instances of the meticulous" in poems (in his short collection, *The Necklace*, 1955) with titles like "Nine Variations in a Chinese Winter Setting," "Eight Observations on the Nature of Eternity," and "Suggestions for the Improvement of a Sunset" (which contains the line "Six points of vantage provide us with six sunsets") (*SA* 5, 9–10).

Richard Swigg, in his book *Charles Tomlinson and the Objective Tradition*, follows Tomlinson's cue by downplaying Stevens' presence in Tomlinson's poetry, implying that the British poet somehow outgrew the American: in Tomlinson's poetry "[t]he human presence coexists with a changing world. But Tomlinson's way of presenting the relation without diminishing the solidity of either shows how he increasingly differs from Stevens" (44). Certainly this statement indicates the essential difference between the two poets. But, on the one hand, the difference has existed from the beginning of Tomlinson's career, and, on the other, Tomlinson has continued to feel the pull of what he thinks of as his opposite. Throughout there has been a continual fascination with Stevens, who has always been an important participant in what Michael Edwards calls Tomlinson's "passionate epistemological exploration" (144).

One can sense Stevens being warded off even where Tomlinson is more forthcoming than he is in *Some Americans*. In an interview with Ian Hamilton in 1964 he said, "It was a case of being haunted [by Stevens] rather than of cold imitation. I was also a painter and this meant that I had

far more interest in the particulars of a landscape or an object than Stevens. Stevens rarely makes one *see* anything in detail for all his talk about a physical universe" (83). In his Author's Preface to the 1966 reprint of *The Necklace*, Tomlinson regards some of the poems it contains as "both a dialogue with and a departure from" Stevens: "Stevens' sense of the complex relation of observer and environment fascinated me, but was there ever a poetry which stood so explicitly by a physical universe and against transcendence, but which gives so little account of that universe, its spaces, patterns, textures, 'a world of canon and fugue,' such as Hopkins spoke of seeing before him." Stevens' "supreme fiction," according to this Preface, is symptomatic of a solipsism whereby reality is dependent on perception. Tomlinson, by contrast, wants a poetry that "accord[s] objects their own existence" (5).

Both the "dialogue with and departure from" Stevens are evident in the poem "The Art of Poetry," which, as Tomlinson recalls in another interview (some twenty-five years after the poem's publication in *The Necklace*), questions even as it echoes Stevens' "The Snow Man": "I was . . . arguing with one of my mentors and with a certain aspect of his elegance" (qtd. in Ross 25):

There must be nothing
 Superfluous, nothing which is not elegant
 And nothing which is if it is merely that.
 (Tomlinson, *CP* 11)

These lines, says Tomlinson, are "a playful demur phrased after" Stevens' lines about the listener who "nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (*CPP* 8):

I was worried that this kind of thing could lead to rather self-conscious writing, and Stevens himself didn't always avoid that. In arguing for words to earn their keep, I was arguing for a kind of exactness in face of the object, which meant an exactness of feeling in the writer. It meant that you must enter into a relationship with things, that you must use your eyes and see what they were offering you—what, at first, you might not notice. (qtd. in Ross and Tomlinson 25)

But "enter[ing] into a relationship with things" sounds like what Stevens thought he was doing when he explained in a letter, in somewhat abstract terms, that "The Snow Man" is "an example of the necessity of identifying oneself with reality in order to understand it and enjoy it" (*L* 464). The breathtaking achievement of the poem, which is in Stevens' most persuasive "decreative" mode, is the apprehension of a reality that is utterly un-anthropomorphic. The poem moves from despondency in emptiness to

an exhilaration of self-voiding; it wins through to a delight in the realization of total otherness, of the not-me. Tomlinson's account does not hear this, does not hear the poem's rhetoric, its registering of the effort not, precisely, to indulge in "self-conscious" imposition. That effort involves the syntax that unravels through the poem's single extended sentence. In resisting the human tendency to anthropomorphize, the poetry finds itself, with haunting seduction, uttering the "sound" it would ward off, conjuring the emotion it would repress. By such means the poem achieves Tomlinson's desired "exactness of feeling in the writer," even if the exactness is not that of descriptive accuracy "in face of the object."

There is perhaps a programmatic refusal by Tomlinson here to meet Stevens on his own ground. The words of "The Snow Man" *do* "earn their keep": theirs is not superfluous elegance, but elegance that serves a purpose. The poem mimes an emotional progression by moving through and thus beyond that very self-consciousness of which Tomlinson accuses Stevens. The poem listens to, even relishes, its own sound in order to exorcize it, to resolve its cadence. If the writing is self-conscious, that is because the subject of the poem is the terror of self-consciousness. The poem shows what it feels like to achieve "a mind of winter," a mind that in the end so abnegates the self as to achieve a triumphant stoicism that refuses to indulge despair. Stevens aims for "an exactness of feeling" by resisting inexact ways of feeling. The resistance is audible in the poem's haunting accumulation of negatives, culminating in the final phrase "the nothing that is." Its way of "enter[ing] into a relationship with things" is an engaged avoidance of a false relationship with things. The more "elegant" the word-play, the more meaningful. Most significant, the move from "nothing" to "the nothing" at the end is not elegance for elegance's sake, but encapsulates the poem's progression from despondency to affirmation. But for the astringent Tomlinson, Stevens' style here conceals more than it reveals. In a poem called "Observation of Facts," written about the same time as "The Art of Poetry," Tomlinson writes: "Style speaks what was seen, / Or it conceals the observation / Behind the observer: a voice / Wearing a ruff" (Tomlinson, *CP* 12). Tomlinson evidently has Stevens in mind here.

If for Tomlinson solipsism was Stevens' temptation, then Tomlinson would resist it with due attention to all that is "bodied over against" the ego (Tomlinson, *CP* 11). His theme is the way of perceiving and what is perceived, "relations and contraries" between self and world (Tomlinson's first pamphlet of poems was called *Relations and Contraries*). Calvin Bedient writes that *The Necklace* "zeroes in on [this] great Tomlinson theme, but vitiates it by a kind of enamelled elegance" (21)—that very elegance of which Tomlinson accuses Stevens. It is true that Tomlinson's early poetry has a fastidiously elegant self-consciousness that comes from the anxiety to shun "exaggeration." The lines preceding the ones already quoted from "The Art of Poetry" read:

But how shall one say so?—
The fact being, that when the truth is not good enough
We exaggerate. Proportions

Matter. It is difficult to get them right.

(Tomlinson, *CP* 11)

The “how” of this “saying” is self-consciously artful. The apparently throwaway phrase “the fact being” gets highlighted in the context of a poem that is about the essential otherness, the “being” of “facts.” The emphatic break, across stanza as well as line, in the two-word sentence “Proportions / Matter” throws into relief the double sense of “matter”: what “matters” is that we attend to the appearance of “matter,” how the phenomenal world exists in space and time. That sentence’s weight and balance is a verbal enactment of how, centrally for Tomlinson, getting things in “proportion” involves the observing eye, seeing the right relationship between self and world. The act of perception involves proportion both moral and spatial, what Tomlinson calls “right feeling” (*SA* 11). The nervous line-break between “nothing” and “superfluous” in the lines quoted earlier (“There must be nothing / Superfluous”) negotiates between total absence and superfluity of presence, between lack of imagination and over-imagination, until the poem comes to rest, almost tranquilly, on its isolated, one-line statement of elegant descriptive fact, which by this time has been earned: “This green twilight has violet borders.” The achievement of this observed fact gives the poet license to conjure up a fleeting “elegance,” not quite a superfluity but not quite a nothing either, in the final four lines about the butterflies, which nevertheless are not held present longer than their dissolving vision allows, “Disappear[ing] as the evening appears.” That achievement, in its art of poetry, acts as a salve to the mind’s initial bruising: “At first, the mind feels bruised” (Tomlinson, *CP* 10–11).

A fascination with “Stevens’ sense of the complex relation of observer and environment” involves Tomlinson’s insistence on self-definition and self-limitation. At about the time he was imitating Stevens’ “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” he was expressing his approval of how Crispin in “The Comedian as the Letter C” “did not attempt to lose identity in the ocean, but rather to allow himself to be changed by the experience of it—to see the world afresh rather than take off into the absolute” (*SA* 11). Being changed by the experience of nature self-evidently has implications for the people who live in a landscape, as well as implications for the landscape itself. For Tomlinson, to see is to become. This epistemological fascination informs the “dialogue with and departure from” Stevens’ “Thirteen Ways” behind Tomlinson’s “Nine Variations in a Chinese Winter Setting,” a poem that also recalls Stevens’ remark, “The proliferation of resemblances extends an object” (*CPP* 691). Yet the fastidious

manner of Tomlinson's synaesthetic resemblances (flute music "counterpointing" various images) is as anxious to confine likeness as to extend it; his "separate instances" are more "meticulous" than Stevens'. Both poems concern "mood," how it is evoked and in what or whom it inheres.

This is Stevens' sixth way of looking at a blackbird:

Icicles filled the long window
With barbaric glass.
The shadow of the blackbird
Crossed it, to and fro.
The mood
Traced in the shadow
An indecipherable cause. (*CPP* 75)

Compare this with Tomlinson's sixth variation, where the "mood" is expressed in a fastidiously negative formulation that delimits as much as it likens ("is not . . . as that" is a way of putting it also found in variations IV and V):

The outline of the water-dragon
Is not embroidered with so intricate a thread
As that with which the flute
Defines the tangible borders of a mood.
(Tomlinson, *CP* 4)

Tomlinson's poem wants the "borders" of mood to be more "tangible," more firmly fixed in the world of "spaces, patterns, textures," less impressionistic, than Stevens' "Icicles" and "barbaric glass," the "cause" of the mood more "decipherable." "Defin[ing] the tangible borders of a mood" is a locution that wants to resist imposing a mood, to locate feeling with "exactness in face of the object." It confines emotion even as emotion is expressed: borders promise boundaries as well as prospects. Stevens' ninth way of looking, on the other hand, promises an infinity of prospects, of imagined horizons:

When the blackbird flew out of sight,
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles. (*CPP* 76)

No doubt for Tomlinson, Stevens' poem is in danger here of "tak[ing] off into the absolute."

Yet the self-reflexivity of Stevens' poetry makes Tomlinson's "solipsist" label too easy. Here is Stevens' eighth way:

I know noble accents
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
But I know, too,
That the blackbird is involved
In what I know. (*CPP* 75–76)

To know that the blackbird is involved in what you know is to know that, in the words of one of Stevens' adages, "The real is only the base. But it is the base" (*CPP* 917). On the other hand, "involved" is a way of putting it that implicitly acknowledges the compromise entailed in this aesthetic. Reality is complicit in "what I know," rather than clarified by the knowing. So knowing that things are involved in what you know has its solipsistic pain, but if that knowledge constitutes poetry (the "accents" and "rhythms"), then poetry can be a means of discovering self in the world and is therefore an escape from solipsism. Stevens' poetry is not merely of the mind, it is self-consciously of the mind. Its realities are things as they seem, because for him how they seem cannot be differentiated from "things as they are" (*CPP* 135), as we know from "The Man with the Blue Guitar." It may be that, in the words of Brian John, "Tomlinson recognized early that a Stevensian aesthetic" entails "the solipsism of the self and that self's need to deny the otherness of things" (67), but "Thirteen Ways" itself implicitly acknowledges the solipsistic dangers of which Tomlinson is so fearful.

More enduring because less programmatic, more complex and deeply felt, more embedded in the poetry's verbal texture is the presence of Stevens in Tomlinson's later work. By this time, according to Tomlinson's account, the ghost of Stevens had been fully exorcized, although, as I shall argue, this is far from the case. The "antecedents" of the poem-sequence "Antecedents: A Homage and Valediction" (from *Seeing Is Believing*) belong to Stevens' French Symbolist poetic inheritance, and the sequence culminates with an implicit acknowledgment of Stevens' place at the end of that tradition. However strong the valedictory note sounded by this homage, it is informed by Tomlinson's conviction that the important European poetic development of our times has moved to America. In an interview he argues that

the thing about American poets is that they realize that they have simply got to read the poetry of other languages, they have simply got to read French poetry, whereas so many English poets are so pleased with the parish pump it doesn't seem to concern them that they ought to know what happened in French Symbolism from, say, 1870 to round about 1920: from Rimbaud up to Valéry. All that phase interests me immensely, and I think it has obviously fed the American poets as well. . . . (qtd. in Orr 252)

As one of the American poets fed by that phase, Stevens informs the dialogue and departure at the end of "Antecedents," in the sixth poem of the sequence, "Something: A Direction." The sequence progresses from a Symbolist solipsistic and interior dusk—"He bows to the looking-glass. Sunsets" ("II. Praeludium"; Tomlinson, *CP* 51)—to the possibility of an outer and actual sunset.

The syntax of "Something: A Direction" is driven by the prospect of what the poem calls "relation / With all that is other." It begins:

Out of the shut cell of that solitude there is
One egress, past point of interrogation.
Sun is, because it is not you; you are
Since you are self, and self delimited
Regarding sun. It downs? I claim? Cannot
Beyond such speech as this, gather conviction?
Judge, as you will, not what I say
But what is, being said. It downs
Recovered, coverless, in a shriven light
And you, returning, may to a shriven self
As from the scene, your self withdraws.

(Tomlinson, *CP* 54)

This reads as though it is one stage, or several stages, on from another poem about the sun, the last in Stevens' *Collected Poems*, "Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself." Stevens' title represents desire rather than achievement. The poem recognizes the "egress" but does not in the end get much beyond the "point of interrogation." The poem's waking consciousness begins by confusing exterior with interior world: "a scrawny cry from outside / Seemed like a sound in his mind" (*CPP* 451). The self's "shut cell" is broken in upon by the dawning sun ("The sun was rising at six" [*CPP* 452]). But however much the poet resists metaphorical elaboration for the sun ("No longer a battered panache above snow"), the fact that he repeatedly has to insist on its exteriority gives rise to doubts ("It would have been outside"; "The sun was coming from outside"). Even the poem's triumphant affirmation of "the colossal sun" is downplayed by the tacked-on phrase "Still far away." This is very much a poem of "preceding" ("A chorister whose c preceded the choir") rather than of achievement. It concludes not with "new knowledge" but with an approximation of it: "It was like / A new knowledge of reality" (*CPP* 452; emphasis added).

In taking its "direction" out of or away from Stevens, Tomlinson's poem begins with an implicit reply to "Not Ideas About the Thing." Tomlinson's sun exists by reason of its being other than human consciousness; conversely, human consciousness exists by reason of its being other than sun. For the poet the "relation / With all that is other" takes the form of language, a matter intimated by the apparently stiff locution, "Regarding sun."

"Regarding" is a kind of pun, meaning "as concerns the sun" and also "when you look at the sun." The pun raises the issue of language directly: "It downs? I claim? Cannot / Beyond such speech as this, gather conviction?" The poem goes on to delineate the division between self and world, a division that, while maintaining you "at your proper bounds," yet entails the knowledge of the pain of exclusion, an understanding of "the textures of your pain." Out of this acknowledgment comes an ability to enter the (poetic) terrain anew, "a country, natural and profuse / Unbroken by past incursions" (Tomlinson, *CP* 54). You are "released" from your solipsistic "prison," the "shut cell of that solitude," into a "new-found" neighborhood now that you have "earned" that "relation / With all that is other."

Both poem and sequence end in a state of suspended determination with a remarkable image for a kind of secular dying into a new life:

Still you must wait,
 For evening's ashen, like the slow fire
 Withdrawn through the whitened log
 Glinting through grain marks where the wood splits:
 Let be its being: the scene extends
 Not hope, but the urgency that hopes for means.
 (Tomlinson, *CP* 54–55)

In troping Stevens' poem "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" here, Tomlinson characteristically both echoes and questions his mentor. "Let be its being" is both like and unlike "Let be be finale of seem" (*CPP* 50) in Stevens' poem. "Still you must wait": the waiting is attendant upon exploring the world that has been opened up by the sequence and by this poem, a world of "relations and contraries" that is respected for its "otherness," where "its being" is "let be." "Let be be finale of seem" says the same sort of thing, but with a flourish—and that is the important difference, for "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" implies that since mortality is commonplace, since it is, unremarkably, the absolute condition of existence, we should not be disconcerted by it, but should allow pleasure to govern the commonplace and everyday. In aesthetic terms this means that art and poetry are related to life insofar as they provide a diversion from it; their relation to existence is antithetical. The corpse is "cold" and "dumb," but meanwhile "The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream"—said with an assertive flourish, twice. Tomlinson's unflourishing version, "Let be its being," asks that life's mortal condition be allowed its full "being" in the poetry, that it acquire a full presence there, as it does in the arresting but patiently attentive (rather than flourishing) image of the "whitened log": a poetic demonstration of an "earned relation / With all that is other." For Stevens, poetry and art are compensation for the gap between self and world; for Tomlinson, they are the way to bridge that gap. Thus, in Tomlinson's poem

"Cézanne at Aix," the mountain of Cézanne's painting is "a stone bridge-head / To that which is tangible" (Tomlinson, *CP* 37).

Secular dying into a new life: my phrase gestures at the numinous sense often felt at the end of a poem by Tomlinson, following on from an attentive contemplation of nature. Significantly, it is in religious terms that Tomlinson came to think about Stevens, in a deeply considered essay, "Wallace Stevens and the Poetry of Scepticism," which has not received the attention it deserves. Its year of publication, 1988, testifies to Tomlinson's continuing interest in Stevens. The essay discusses Stevens in terms of a poet living in a secular age who hankers for spiritual certainty: "there is a loneliness in Stevens's poetry which places him close to the European scepticism of Nietzsche" (399).

In Tomlinson's view this state of affairs has positive as well as negative consequences for Stevens' poetry and for the direction poets might take following him. On the one hand, at least Stevens' example offers the possibility of fresh contact with the world, unlike the inventions of conventional religion: some of his poetry "finds a way of telling us that the fiction of the poem, by clearing a space for meaning and fresh apprehension, can reconcile us to a world of fact in a way that the fictions of religion no longer can" (397). On the other hand, "Stevens's leanings towards religion" (405) account for his notion of a "supreme fiction," which, according to Tomlinson, is a backward-looking Arnoldian substitution of aesthetic for religious satisfaction. As Tomlinson reminds us, poetry as "the supreme fiction" first appeared in the poem "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," in which the poet "tells her that now the church has failed our imaginations, poetry must do the job for us" (397). The vacuum felt by the absence of religious belief ("the intellectual and emotional need which resulted in [Stevens' alleged] deathbed conversion to Catholicism") was filled by the poet's own imaginative structures: "In such a universe, nature reflects back at man the order his imagination has projected on it" (400) (this is about "Evening Without Angels"). To Tomlinson this situation is always a dangerously solipsistic state of affairs. In this context he refers to "old-fashioned romantic excess" and states that one of Stevens' most important themes, "the alliance of Death and Beauty," "had been run ragged by romantics and decadents alike" (394). However, being post-romantic, Stevens "is self-conscious about his themes in a way romantics and decadents were not" (394), a convincing observation and one that is notably absent from Tomlinson's earlier dealings with Stevens.

But this self-consciousness elicits from Tomlinson in his "Poetry and Scepticism" essay a curious blend of insight and myopia when responding to some of Stevens' poetry. "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," he argues, ironically ventriloquizes "the kind of middle-aged romantic poetry his uncle might have written" (394). This is fairly said, but for Tomlinson the poem triumphs in spite of not because of its ironizing style. He quotes the second stanza:

A red bird flies across the golden floor.
 It is a red bird that seeks out his choir
 Among the choirs of wind and wet and wing.
 A torrent will fall from him when he finds.
 Shall I uncrumple this much-crumpled thing?
 I am a man of fortune greeting heirs;
 For it has come that thus I greet the spring.
 These choirs of welcome choir for me farewell.
 No spring can follow past meridian.
 Yet you persist with anecdotal bliss
 To make believe a starry *connaissance*. (CPP 11)

Tomlinson then comments: "To the apparently stale topic and into the apparently unusable idiom Stevens brings new life, an awareness of nature that is fresh and individual in this evocation of wet woods, the sounding of bird-song through wind and rain" (395). Tomlinson's is a way of commenting that wants to be deaf to the self-reflexivity of Stevens' medium. There is an element of wish-fulfillment in Tomlinson's response: here, he feels, is one of those rare occasions when Stevens makes the reader "see" something. But even the lines about the red bird are more abstract and removed from their subject than this praise for a fresh "awareness of nature" acknowledges. How does the speaker "uncrumple this much-crumpled thing," the well-worn subject of Spring's awakening and its attendant angst? "For it has come that thus I greet the spring" alerts the reader to the way of greeting, where "red" against "golden" takes on an emblematic air, and where "floor" and "choir" conjure up an amphitheater of the imagination more than they do "new life." This writing is closer to Yeatsian dancing floors than to a fresh awareness of nature.

That said, it is clear that, however affecting Tomlinson finds what he takes to be Stevens' poetic "evocation," this is not enough for Tomlinson's own "passionate epistemology" (in those words by Michael Edwards), his desire for poetry to cleave close to cognition. For Tomlinson in this essay, Stevens has a "power of sensuous evocation," but he lacks "the sensuous particularizing of shapes and substances of the kind one finds in (say) Hopkins" (395)—and note once more the contrast with Hopkins. Stevens is above all for Tomlinson a preparation for the sort of poetry he, Tomlinson, would write: "Stevens's conviction that 'The great poem of earth remains to be written' does not quite carry him sufficiently far to write it" (397). If, for Tomlinson, Stevens represents the culmination of romanticism's solipsistic cul-de-sac, he also pointed the way out, even if he could not quite take it himself. Thus, Tomlinson is most convinced by the poems of Stevens that "clear a space," less so by those that try to fill that space: "Stevens is a poet whose imagination warms to the cold. He wanted to write a 'poetry of earth' and to be the poet of 'a physical universe,' praising 'total satisfaction, the moment of total summer.' Yet 'total

summer' seems to yield little but rhetoric to Stevens's wintry temperament" (396). In this Tomlinson is following Yvor Winters, to whom his essay appeals on several occasions, the Winters who praised such poems as "The Snow Man" and "The Course of a Particular," but dismissed, as hedonist, poems such as "Credences of Summer." When the latter poem insists, "Let's see the very thing and nothing else. / Let's see it with the hottest fire of sight" (CPP 322), Tomlinson would complain that this is merely voicing a desire to see, not doing the seeing.

But the thrust of the essay is sympathy for someone whom Tomlinson sees as a figure of spiritual desolation and desire. He describes as "acute" but "harsh" Helen Vendler's comment on "The Idea of Order at Key West" in her book *On Extended Wings*: "'Stevens' self seems to have presented him with a world excessively interior, in which the senses, with the exception of the eye, are atrophied or impoverished'" (403). Tomlinson takes the force of "excessively interior," but stresses the lack of "impoverishment" in the lines about the woman singing beside the sea:

And when she sang, the sea,
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker. (CPP 106)

But, significantly, Tomlinson wants to hear in the poem a suspicion of its own imaginative inventiveness: "His words, like her notes, spilling out over nature or 'reality,' annex it to human needs. Here her music virtually compels it into ordered significance. Yet, curiously, Stevens himself stands apart with 'pale Ramon,' as if he cannot quite believe in the woman's opulent solipsism" (404). Thus, in spite of Tomlinson's habitually reiterated suspicion of Stevens' latter-day romantic ego—what in this essay he calls "the lyric accord" (404)—he is anxious to credit Stevens with a similar wariness, even if there is a degree of wish-fulfillment in Tomlinson's reaction here to "The Idea of Order": the last lines acknowledge that the woman's song has temporarily transformed not only her apprehension of the world, but the poet's as well.

Evidently, this particular dialogue with Stevens had started some twenty or so years earlier, in Tomlinson's less opulently phrased poem "The Hill" (*American Scenes and Other Poems*, 1966), where, as in "The Idea of Order," the poet observes a woman in a landscape while addressing a third person, thus allowing a similarly distanced, assessing perspective. Like Stevens in his poem, Tomlinson sets up an interrogatory relationship between poet and woman, though withholding the lyric expansiveness of this sort of Stevensian questioning:

Whose spirit is this? we said, because we knew
It was the spirit that we sought and knew
That we should ask this often as she sang. (CPP 105)

"The Hill" begins with its rather different kind of questioning:

Do not call to her there,
but let her go
bearing our question
in her climb: what does she
confer on the hill, the hill on her? (Tomlinson, *CP* 114)

The poem goes on to delineate this mutual dependence and independence of woman and landscape, the "contraries" as well as the "relations," and ends with words that sound like a deliberate dialogue with and departure from Stevens:

So, do not call to her there:
let her go on,
whom the early sun
is climbing up with to the hill's crown—
she, who did not make it, yet can make
the sun go down by coming down. (Tomlinson, *CP* 114)

These lines playfully resist the "opulent solipsism" of the woman in "The Idea of Order at Key West." A punning play on the first "make," ("she did not make it to the summit," and "she did not create the sun") introduces a playful, complementary hyperbole centered on the second "make" (she "can make / the sun go down," that is, "she can outshine the sun"). This calls to mind, even as it wards off, Stevens' "she was the maker," the Stevensian notion that, in Tomlinson's words about "The Idea of Order at Key West," the woman "compels [nature] into ordered significance." If that possibility is allowed in Tomlinson's poem, it is also tonally qualified. For Tomlinson, the relationship between nature and art is a constant "negotiation," not an antithesis, neither a "supreme fiction" nor a "rage for order." "Nature is hard," this poem says, "but, held on the giant palm, one may negotiate / and she, rising athwart it, is showing the art" (Tomlinson, *CP* 114). Part of that negotiation here is the anthropomorphic vision of the hill as a "giant palm": a bold metaphor, but one that does not stray far from the physically and visually present.

In the "Poetry of Scepticism" essay, then, Tomlinson likes the poetry by Stevens where "there is a resistance involved" (*CPP* 460, to quote Stevens' "The Course of a Particular"), where "interiority" acknowledges its opposite. He approves of the fact that in "Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself" the "world excessively interior" "is once more beset from beyond itself" (404), as he puts it. He welcomes the poems at the end of Stevens' career that, instead of striving to create a myth, are content to rest in their own uncertainty, poems such as "The World as Meditation," which

demonstrate a Keatsian “negative capability,” “a scepticism that nourishes rather than undermines” (408).

But for all that, Stevens represents the end of a line for Tomlinson, who sums up:

His hope was that [the supreme fiction] was a mask of the real. But so often the real seemed illusively distant and difficult to situate within the body of the universe. . . . Stevens is a poet of evocations rather than patterned inscapes. He hovers above and about his subjects rather than entering into their life co-extensive with his own. “The American Sublime” may complain of “The empty spirit / In vacant space,” yet no square inch of American space is really empty or unpatterned. Desert or forest will both give back to the eye enough particulars to nourish and sustain if the demands of subjectivity are not exorbitant. (405)

These sentences provide an instructive way into Tomlinson’s “Swimming Chenango Lake,” a poem with a markedly American—a Native-American—title and setting. Despite this poem’s awareness that it constitutes a “new knowledge of reality,” in which knower and known are in perpetually altering relationship, it impressively succeeds in situating itself “within the body of the universe.” For all its epistemological knowingness, it maintains a physical precision, “give[s] back to the eye enough particulars” to conjure the actual. Although the poem intimates the possibility of infinite readings and countless ways of “looking” (“He reads the water’s autumnal hesitations / A wealth of ways” [Tomlinson, *CP* 155]), and although therefore the poem is necessarily a partial reading, excluding as well as including (“There is a geometry of water, for this / Squares off the clouds’ redundances” [Tomlinson, *CP* 155])—although all this is so, the poem works deliberately, ostentatiously even, for its Hopkinsian “patterned inscapes.” Stevens’ poetry invariably knows that “*It Must Change*” (*CPP* 336); but Tomlinson’s would find that apprehension embodied:

It is a geometry and not
A fantasia of distorting forms, but each
Liquid variation answerable to the theme
It makes away from, plays before.
(Tomlinson, *CP* 155)

The “play” with which the musical metaphor is here elaborated signifies poetic deliberation, where the phrase “Liquid variation” brings together concept and physical description (though some may feel that the poet overplays the deliberation with the insistent abstraction of such words as “theme”).

If Stevens “hovers above and about his subjects rather than entering into their life co-extensive with his own,” the protagonist of “Swimming Chenango Lake” does not remain hovering above and about for long, but takes the plunge in order (punningly) to “grasp” and be grasped by its meaning, to realize his “dependence” (another pun) on what he sees, that to define one’s environment is to define the self:

But he has looked long enough, and now
Body must recall the eye to its dependence
As he scissors the waterscape apart
And sways it to tatters. Its coldness
Holding him to itself, he grants the grasp,
For to swim is also to take hold
On water’s meaning, to move in its embrace
And to be, between grasp and grasping, free.
(Tomlinson, *CP* 155)

The poem registers—as Tomlinson acknowledges that “The Idea of Order at Key West” likewise registers—that this is a temporary accommodation between self and world, that there is a time to apprehend (to grasp), and a time to let go, which is the note on which the poem ends. “[A] geometry of water” at the start has, by the end, given way to

a mere mosaic of tiny shatterings,
Where a wind is unscaping all images in the flowing
obsidian,
The going-elsewhere of ripples incessantly shaping.
(Tomlinson, *CP* 156)

Here the poem unmakes itself, “unscaping” its achieved “images” (“unscaping” significantly inverting those Hopkinsian “inscapes”), as the world goes on its way, “incessantly shaping” itself in a continuum that goes elsewhere, leaving poem and poet behind.

One way of responding to “Swimming Chenango Lake” is as a counter to the bleak Stevensian scepticism and lonely disbelief Tomlinson finds in “Sunday Morning.” In the “Poetry of Scepticism” essay, in a reading much influenced by Winters, Tomlinson argues that “Sunday Morning” ends on a note of “unappealing tragedy” (398) because it remains unconvinced by the myth it has presented as an alternative to moribund Christianity:

And, in the isolation of the sky,
At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
Downward to darkness, on extended wings. (*CPP* 56)

"This world drifts on," writes Tomlinson, "with no divinely sanctioned purpose, through space, an 'island solitude,' and the poem with its 'casual flocks of pigeons' enacts the movement 'downward to darkness' and annihilation" (399), although "annihilation" is an unwarrantably bleak reading of Stevens' final phrase, "on extended wings." The emotions elicited are more "ambiguous" than that, his lines posing and poisoning their opposites in an impressive rhetorical balance: "wings" balances "sink"; "extended" balances "downward"; and "casual" is poised with and against the rhetorical symmetry of these lines.

Be that as it may, "Swimming Chenango Lake" sounds as if it would answer the close of "Sunday Morning," or at any rate Tomlinson's sense of it:

The image he has torn
Flows-to behind him, healing itself,
Lifting and lengthening, splayed like the feathers
Down an immense wing whose darkening spread
Shadows his solitariness: alone, he is unnamed
By this baptism, where only Chenango bears a name
In a lost language he begins to construe. . . .
(Tomlinson, *CP* 155)

Stevens' wings of darkness are present here, not as an image of existential solitude, but as part of a process of transformation, of searching, knowing, and defining. The poetry embodies a condition of perpetual change. For Tomlinson, "Sunday Morning" laments the passing of an old dispensation, an outmoded system of belief, only to fall back on a reality without meaning, "an old chaos of the sun." But "Swimming Chenango Lake" welcomes a new dispensation, in which a condition of ignorance is the perpetual potential for renewed apprehension. The new dispensation is intimated in the reverse "baptism" of "unnaming." The perpetual definings and redefinings of language, of poetry, should be at one with the perpetual transformation, the continual process, which is "the great poem of the earth."

In its characteristic merging of abstract and concrete, mental and physical, the diction of "Swimming Chenango Lake" intimates that identity can only be sought in relationship with the world:

A speech of densities and derisions, of half-
Replies to the questions his body must frame
Frogwise across the all but penetrable element.
(Tomlinson, *CP* 155)

"[D]ensities" conjures up the element water, "derisions" somehow keeps it at bay. "Penetration," like "grasping," can be mental as well as physical. But the poem cleaves to its element: sensation rather than evocation—"unappeasing" adventure, not tragedy. The adventure of sensation is con-

tinuous and ever-changing: "The going-elsewhere of ripples incessantly shaping"—where the phrase "the going-elsewhere" impressively combines abstract and physical, description and action, noun and verb, perception and phenomenon.

Tomlinson's most characteristic poetry wants to capture a moment of contemplation in the ceaseless going-elsewhere, the "wave, interminably flowing" (from Stevens' "Peter Quince at the Clavier" [CPP 74], quoted approvingly by Tomlinson in "The Poetry of Scepticism"), which is Being. However, perhaps this is to take him too much at his own word. For a contemplative such as Tomlinson, only art can capture the ceaseless going-elsewhere—and so, however much he wants to write the poetry of earth, poetry will always be of the mind. This is the paradox described by Calvin Bedient:

Despite his animadversions against Romanticism, Tomlinson has shown himself quite ready to think of art . . . as a spiritual flowering beyond anything offered by reality. . . . Let [the poems] set nature before us as a sufficient spiritual end; still, their very existence as poetry, their very excess over nature, suggests that it is art, and not nature, that cures the ache of being. (20)

Hence it is that, in Bedient's words, Tomlinson's "painstaking descriptions" are "so often hard to seize with the eye" (22), a curious paradox indeed. Moreover, there is considerable irony in the fact that Bedient's response to Tomlinson accords with Tomlinson's to Stevens, although Stevens' poetics never sets as much store by a Hopkinsian "hæcceity" (Hopkins' term, derived from Duns Scotus, for "thisness") as does Tomlinson's. But for all the insistence of Tomlinson's poetics on exteriority, his poetic "descriptions" are interior worlds: landscape becomes mindscape by the act of poetic encompassing. Often the poems glut with their pictorial excess, their worrying away at visual precision, their moments of perceptual alteration. The poem "Clouds," for instance, is by turns concerned with and consoled by the fact that the dreamer-poet cannot "fix" the miracle of cloudscape. Yet are we not more beguiled by the poem as dreamscape, as "the image of an interiority" (to quote Tomlinson on Stevens' "The World as Meditation"), than by the implicit, Wordsworthian injunction at the end that "the dreamer [should] wak[e] to the categorical call" of "a common day" (Tomlinson, *CP* 170)? It is an entrancing poem about nothing, or, to put it another way, about a state of mind. The ghost of Stevens is never exorcized.

III. TOMLINSON AND WILLIAMS

Of the great roll call of American modernist poets, Williams was one of the last to gain a reputation in England. That he eventually did so, as late

as the 1970s, was largely owing to the efforts of Tomlinson, who edited *William Carlos Williams: A Critical Anthology* and *William Carlos Williams: Selected Poems*, published in 1972 and 1976, respectively. In the Introduction to the *Critical Anthology*, Tomlinson draws attention to an article on Williams by Denis Donoghue that states that Williams “had no interest in the kind of thing that interested Stevens: philosophy, ontology, epistemology, gorgeous nonsense of the mind. . . . If he saw a blackbird, he had no interest in the thirteen ways in which Stevens saw it: one way was enough, given reasonable lucidity. This is to say that Williams was a moralist, not a philosophic poet” (CA 383). Hence in declaring that Donoghue’s article is “the first piece of real criticism to appear on Williams in a significant English review” (CA 208), Tomlinson was no doubt adding to the armory he would use to protect himself against the allure of Stevens, and undoubtedly also the figure of Williams became part of that armory. Furthermore, it is true that, for all his advertised epistemological preoccupations, Tomlinson too is a moralist, not a philosophical poet. For himself he would probably not want to make the distinction: the epistemology is founded on right perception. But there is a moral insistence in the reiterated concern with achieving a balance between self and world.

If for Stevens each poem is “like / A new knowledge of reality” (CPP 452), for Williams it is a part of reality. Hence Tomlinson’s interest in Williams’ obsessive preoccupation with poetic form. As Tomlinson emphasizes—an emphasis central to his aesthetics—poetic form for Williams is a perceptual event. The introductions to Tomlinson’s *Critical Anthology* and his *William Carlos Williams: Selected Poems* both highlight this statement—one of Williams’ “finest aperçus”—from Williams’ Prologue to *Kora in Hell*: a poem is “‘tough by no quality it borrows from a logical recital of events nor from the events themselves but solely from the attenuated power which draws perhaps many broken things into a dance by giving them thus a full being’ ” (CA 35; SP 16). This statement reveals “Williams’s dissatisfaction with ‘pure imagism,’ ” and it prepares one “for the jagged asymmetries of *Spring and All*” (CA 34, 35).

As a painter himself, Tomlinson pays close attention to the influence of cubism on Williams’ early poetry. Quoting this pivotal sentence from *Spring and All* (about Shakespeare), “‘He holds no mirror up to nature but with his imagination rivals nature’s composition with his own,’ ” Tomlinson comments, “Shakespeare, too, could be made to belong to the moment of cubism” (SP 15). Williams’ “sense of a form” places him “close to the cubist spirit which prevails in the ‘brokenness’ of composition of *Spring and All*,” a book of “cubist fragmentations” (CA 35, 29). Tomlinson writes that “the imagination for Williams was identified with the cubist re-structuring of reality: modern poetry with its ellipses, its confrontation of disparate, its use of verbal collages . . . provided direct analogies” (SP 15). The modern poet, like the cubist painter, should not be mimetic, but should participate in the world as becoming.

ing violence to the contingent nature of the world perceived: "The form, once it comes, is free of the fact, is a *dance above* the fact" (SP 16). The dance metaphor comprehends the agility of Williams' poetry at its characteristic best, the poem as surprising event: "the vivacity arises . . . from the unexpectedness of Williams' apparently wayward forms" (SP 19). In this context Tomlinson rightly questions J. Hillis Miller's argument in *Poets of Reality* that Williams' "work sees the disappearance of all dualism," for it is "from a duality that much of the interest of his work arises: the words 'accurately accompany' a perception of the forms of reality, they dance over or with these forms, but it is the gap between words and forms that gives poetry its chance to exist and to go on existing" (SP 17). The slippage here in Tomlinson's use of the word "form" from its earlier meaning of poetic form (implicit in that phrase "the form . . . is a *dance above* the fact") is significant: it allows both that forms are out there to be perceived (forms of, belonging to, reality) and that their presence depends on their being discovered in the act of poetry. As Williams argues in *Spring & All*, nature "is not opposed to art but apposed to it" (53).

Tomlinson's sense of Williams' aesthetics makes for a compelling account of that overexposed poem, "The Red Wheelbarrow":

What depends on the red wheelbarrow for Williams is the fact that its presence can be rendered over into words, that the perception can be slowed down and meditated on by regulating, line by line, the gradual appearance of these words. The imagination "accurately accompanies" the wheelbarrow, or whatever facets of reality attract Williams, by not permitting too ready and emotional a fusion with them. (SP 17)

The poem reifies the act of consciousness. This is a poetry of presence, an attempt to objectify, to give form to, the process of perception. Wondering how Williams' poem "Raindrops on a Briar" gets from its opening to its conclusion, Tomlinson writes: "wasn't that devious track the poem's most exact way of saying what it had to and by a superb use of form?" (SP 19).

Out of this understanding comes Tomlinson's essentially Objectivist position on the nature of poetic language: "when the dance with facts suffices, syntax, the forms of grammar, puns, the ambiguous pull between words unpunctuated or divided by line-endings, these all contribute to—accompany—the richness of a reality one can never completely fuse with, but which affords a resistance whereby the I can know itself" (SP 18). Such an alignment of identity with the poetic act recalls the argument of Olson's "Projective Verse"—and Tomlinson makes repeated reference in his prose to Williams' reception of this essay, "with its preference for an explorative syllable-based verse and its invitation 'to step back here to this place of the elements and minims of language . . . to engage speech where it is least careless—and least logical'" (SP 20). In the Introduction to his *Se-*

lected Poems of Williams, Tomlinson returns to the Poundian foundation of Olson's Objectivist poetics with their emphasis on poetry's physiological origins and registers: there is an essential connection between Williams' emphasis on physical place and the nature of his poetic language, between the strong presence in his poetry of the outer world and the way his lines sound. Tomlinson likes Pound's description of the stylistic "jerks, sulks, balks, outblurts and jump-overs" of *Al Que Quiere!* and comments that "Not only is 'locality' . . . the geographic source of Williams' poetry, but 'locality,' seen as the jerks and outblurts of speech rendered on to the here and now of the page, is the source of his lineation." He goes on to argue that "the sound structure of the poems . . . is an expression of strains, breath pauses, bodily constrictions and releases. Thus Williams's 'locality' begins with a somatic awareness, a physiological presence in time and space, and this in quite early poems" (*SP* 11–12). This understanding of the poem as something that registers the poet's bodily presence simultaneously with the world he perceives, a presence manifested in the grain and texture of poetic lineation, is strongly reminiscent of Olson's argument (in "Projective Verse") based on the crucial, if much debated, proposition that "the line comes . . . from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes" (19).

Thus, in Williams, Tomlinson finds confirmation for his conviction that the poem is an exploratory act of self-definition, in which the poet locates his being and identity within but also over against the world he inhabits, in apposition to it: "a resistance whereby the I can know itself." This is the conviction "Swimming Chenango Lake" offers as the alternative to a Stevensian vision:

a lost language he begins to construe—
 A speech of densities and derisions, of half-
 Replies to the questions his body must frame
 Frogwise across the all but penetrable element.
 (Tomlinson, *CP* 155)

That "language" is "construed" by means of a "somatic awareness" ("the questions his body must frame"). But characteristically the "contraries" are emphasized as much as the "relations" between self and world: the questions are framed in the "all but penetrable element" ("it is the gap between words and forms that gives poetry its chance to exist").

It may seem paradoxical that Williams' preoccupation with form should accompany an emphasis on presence, a search for poetic immediacy and alertness to the unpredictable. But such a paradox underlies the appeal to an analogy with cubism and "dance." It also provided the impulse for Objectivism in America and the invention of such oxymoronic concepts as "open form." It accounts, too, for the appealingly provisional nature of Williams' critical pronouncements. In his essay "Some Presences on the

Scene," Tomlinson quotes approvingly Williams' statement, " 'The goal of writing is to keep a beleaguered line of understanding which has movement' " (221), a statement that lies behind many of Tomlinson's penetratingly attentive readings of particular poems by Williams. He shows how in "Spring Strains" (a poem from *Al Que Quiere!*) the "relation between subject and object appears . . . in a series of images of physical strain"—and this way of putting it rightly notices the crucial pun in Williams' title. It is very much a poem that "feels out its own balks and resistances against those of the scene outside." Tomlinson points out that the poem "end[s], as so often in Williams, on a dangling clause that pulls the main clause towards incompleteness and asymmetry [*sic*]," a device that for Tomlinson signals the poet's refusal to impose himself on the object of his perception (SP 12–13).

That "beleaguered line of understanding" is similarly evident in Williams' poem "Young Sycamore," with its sly syntactical waywardness, where the opening statement, "I must tell you," leads the reader to expect a dependent clause ("I must tell you that . . .") that never comes, an assuredly "open form" maneuver. The sycamore's "undulant / thrust," its action of "sending out / young branches on / all sides" is never syntactically completed, so that at the end of the poem the action of the "twigs / bending forward / hornlike at the top" (SP 63) remains unfinished (there is no final punctuation). The action can be imagined to continue after the poem has stopped, the tree growing beyond the margins of the poem, so to speak. In his essay "Some Presences on the Scene," Tomlinson writes: "It is as if Williams had learned to fit his words accurately to the moment-by-moment progress of the happening he was a part of—a part of, rather than master of, as a more rigid formal approach might have implied" (222), a formulation that implicitly acknowledges the richly contradictory nature of Williams' aesthetic with its desire to give form to the immediate and changeable.

Tomlinson picks up the word "strain" in another poem by Williams, "Trees" (again from *Al Que Quiere!*), to show how its "music" conveys a resistance between poet and world, "the jump-overs at the line breaks enacting the pressure of that straining . . . the poem like the tree dissociating itself from a blent music for [the] 'melody / of harsh threads.' 'Bent' puns and rhymes eagerly against 'blent' in this piece" (SP 13–14). According to this view, syntax and lineation are an index of the poem's continually changing relationship with and participation in the scene: perception is a constant becoming. Thus, Tomlinson's statement (in an interview with Jed Rasula and Mike Erwin) that "language stylizes our perception" (412) may mean that language is necessarily at several removes from perception. But it also means that language gives form to perception, that there is no such thing as a pure medium of cognition; the verbal artefact, the "machine made out of words" (Williams, SE 256), participates in the world it conceives.

To inquire whether Tomlinson's own poetry shows a "beleaguered line of understanding" of the kind he finds in Williams' poetry raises the question of whether such poetic strategies are imitable, whether the very attempt to imitate a technique that makes a virtue of intuition and spontaneity—however self-consciously and with an artlessness only apparent—is not in the end self-defeating. Tomlinson's criticism is revealingly aware of the contradictions inherent in Williams' aesthetic, but to translate that awareness into poetic practice is another matter. It is the great, paradoxical achievement of Williams' poetry at its best to give form to the formless and chancy, to give the impression that pattern emerges from the words as it will. But to many readers Tomlinson's poetry may come across as leaving little to chance (even though one of his poems is called "The Chances of Rhyme").

An instructive example is Tomlinson's poem "The Tree" (from *The Way In and Other Poems*, 1974), evidently written with the three tree poems by Williams in mind: "Spring Strains," "Young Sycamore," and "Trees." "The Tree" employs Williams' short line, as if in imitation of the nervously hesitant, exploratory, visually and auditorily alert sensibility of Williams. This is the sort of lineation that in Williams' hands appears never to know quite where it is going, that lives on its wits, as Tomlinson's reading of Williams ably demonstrates. But is this the effect of Tomlinson's poem, or are its strategies more composed than that? "Young Sycamore" and "The Tree" are both evidently based on photographs, and thus the scenes they depict have already been interpreted by the perceiving artist. But in Tomlinson's poem the reader is made more conscious of the intervention of the poet. According to Bram Dijkstra, "Young Sycamore" "would seem to be a minute description" (190) of a tree in a photograph by Alfred Stieglitz, whereas the photograph on which "The Tree" is based is of a treeless urban street of terraced houses; the poem itself tells us that its "tree" is an imaginative invention:

This child, shovelling away
what remains of snow—
a batter of ash and crystals—
knows nothing of the pattern
his bent back lifts
above his own reflection:
it climbs the street-lamp's stem
and cross-bar, branching
to take in all the lines
from gutter, gable, slates
and chimney-crowns to the high
pillar of a mill chimney
on a colourless damp sky:
there in its topmost air

and eyrie rears that tree
his bending sends up
from a treeless street, its roots
in the eye and in the net the shining
flagstones spread at his feet. (Tomlinson, *CP* 247)

These lines evidently recall the endless ending of Williams' "Young Sycamore," with its "twigs / bending forward / hornlike at the top" (*SP* 63). The poet of "The Tree" wants there to be "pattern," but the poem resists the notion of its being humanly imposed. There is a "form of reality" out there that exists both independent of and dependent on the poet's perception. The pattern both "climbs" of its own accord, as it were, and has its "roots in the eye" of the beholder, which could be a camera-eye as well as the eye/I of the poet. That "eye" comes as something of a surprise at the end of the poem, as if to locate a perceiver only after, and therefore as a result of, the exfoliating, "branching" act of looking that is the poem itself: "a resistance whereby the I can know itself."

For Williams the action of "telling" ("I must tell you," or "so much depends / upon") becomes the poem's occasion, the event that implicitly locates a teller in the telling. But the emphasis is on "implicitly." Tomlinson's "The Tree" is explicit in its epistemological instructions. The fact that the child in the poem "knows nothing of the pattern" strongly suggests that the poet, and with his guidance the reader, are to know much about it. The tree that the poet envisions behind this unvisionary, urban scene is at first suggested by that low-key metaphor in "branching." The "pattern" branches out visually and verbally through a series of consonantal and assonantal echoes, making a pattern of sound that reaches up and out, as it were, to "that tree": "gutter, gable, slates," "chimney," "high," "pillar," "mill," "air," "eyrie," "rears," "tree," and on through "bending," "sends," "treeless," "street," "eye," "net," "shining," "spread," "feet." Against these aspiring and inspiring vowel sounds are the undertones of what it is the poem is aspiring to elevate itself above, without at the same time ever allowing itself, in what Tomlinson would regard as romantic afflatus, to leave the physical environment behind: the undertones of words, sounds, and realities such as "colourless," "damp," "flagstones." But at the same time "flagstones" is made to echo "topmost" and "roots," the open vowels that intimate the extent, from bottom to top, of the whole aspiring branching and quasi-visionary "pattern." Even as the poem would "net" the elusively other, it does not want to reject the urban realities.

This poem's verbal and audible pattern shows that Tomlinson has learned much from the kind of music he has heard in Williams' poetry. But Williams at his characteristic best is less direct, more wily, slyer even than this. Would he have felt the need to point out that the tree is present only in the eye of the beholder, that it is in reality "a treeless street," that the inscribing of this pattern is only for the initiated, for the poet-figure

who is privileged to see the pattern that the inhabitants of the scene “know nothing” about? For all its affinities with Williams’ aesthetic, Tomlinson’s poetry is more self-evidently “knowing” in a way that is perhaps inevitable for a writer of the “old world” learning from the “new.”

This edgy poetic relationship between the two poets bears on the fact that the Englishman did not share the American’s openness to a pluralist society. It is arguable that Tomlinson’s attraction to a Williamsite open-form poetic sits uneasily—if productively—with a more “closed” attitude to society. However, by studying Williams’ example, Tomlinson seems to have wanted to come to terms with what he felt was contemporary society’s “leveling” suburbanization of spirit. The opening, title poem of *The Way In*, the collection that contains “The Tree,” addresses the urban expansion of the industrial Midlands where the poet was born. The poet first describes, with considerable bitterness, “the way in” along an urban free-way past “demolitions,” redevelopments of “mannerless high risers,” and “deformations of acrid heat.” He then homes in on an aged couple from the “nomad hierarchy” in the process of being rehoused, cast out from their imagined Eden, she “a sexagenarian Eve,” “our lady of nameless metals.” Finally, the poet tries to imagine a future:

Perhaps those who have climbed into their towers
Will eye it all differently, the city spread
In unforeseen configurations, and living with this,
Will find that civility I can only miss—and yet
It will need more than talk and trees
To coax a style from these disparities.
(Tomlinson, *CP* 242)

The poet has coaxed his own style effectively—and thrustingly angry it is earlier in the poem. It “sways” (“The needle-point’s swaying reminder,” begins the first and last stanzas) impressively between scorn and depressed sympathy. The sympathy finds expression not in describing “the dismantlings of a neighbourhood,” but in an imagined world, those “unforeseen configurations.” It is not a style of “jerks, sulks, balks, outbursts and jump-overs,” not a style that participates in the “locality” by finding sympathetic speech for it, that can create an “admiring” participatory verbal “dance” out of the “clutter” of poverty in Williams’ “Pastoral,” which is the first poem in Tomlinson’s *Selected Poems* of Williams:

When I was younger
it was plain to me
I must make something of myself.
Older now
I walk back streets
admiring the houses

of the very poor:
roof out of line with sides
the yards cluttered
with old chicken wire, ashes,
furniture gone wrong;
the fences and outhouses
built of barrel-staves
and parts of boxes, all,
if I am fortunate,
smeared a bluish green
that properly weathered
pleases me best
of all colors.

No one
will believe this
of vast import to the nation. (*SP* 25)

Richard Swigg, discussing Tomlinson's debt to Williams, appears to prefer the pupil's poetry to the master's. Having noted that in "Pastoral" the "straight idea of American progress is flouted" by the depiction of "the houses / of the very poor," Swigg grudgingly adds, "Apart from the delight they give, . . . there is little further realization" (96). This is in spite of the fact that it is in connection with "Pastoral" and other poems like it that (as Swigg points out) Tomlinson makes this persuasive comment: "Instead of wishing simply to reform the poor . . . [Williams] senses there is a point where the imagination, partaking of this anarchy, could dance with it, could 'lift' it to an answering form, but a form fully responsive to the waywardness and inconclusiveness of daily realities" (*SP* 13). But here, according to Swigg, is where Tomlinson outdoes Williams. Tomlinson's "answering form," argues Swigg, "is intellectually sharper than the American's. . . . '[A]nswerable' denotes accountability to fact, but also the capacity for reply. For the nimble human consciousness, separate from what it dances with, undertakes a dialogue where it can 'answer' fact—particularly the degraded, urban variety—with the language of possibilities" (96). But it is precisely the judgmental consciousness in words such as "degraded" that Williams' poetry does not want to countenance. The "further realization" of "Pastoral" is the poet's relationship to what he is describing, which is not easy to characterize, but is indeed "responsive" and alertly, even uneasily, "answerable." The difference within similarity between the titles "Pastoral" and "The Tree" makes the point. Both titles are ironic, for Williams' poem is not a pastoral idyll but a suburban slum, so to speak, and Tomlinson's tree is absent from the urban scene he is describing. But "Pastoral" intimates the poet's would-be benign attitude

toward his subject, whereas "The Tree" represents what the poet would imaginatively impose on his subject.

The lightly self-parodic irony at the start of "Pastoral" immediately acknowledges that the poet implicates himself in the act of describing his surroundings. The poem's way of "partaking of this anarchy," of "dancing with it" (an effect conveyed in part by the faintly syncopated rhythms), reflects as much on the poet's place in the scene as on the scene itself. If he indirectly berates himself for an erstwhile patronizingly youthful attitude that would have shunned the poor neighborhood, his older self can be accused of a voyeuristically patronizing attitude in the very act of "admiring the houses / of the very poor." Yet the poet seems to know this, and he goes on implicitly to acknowledge his own self-regard by raising the possibility that he might be "fortunate" (although the idea of the "fortunate" in these circumstances is problematized even as it is uttered). Willy sincerity characterizes the poet's self-blame and self-exculpation, and the concluding sentence deflates pretension by speaking the truth, even as it lays claim with quiet irony to a certain self-worth with its disclaimer of "vast import to the nation." Williams' adroit handling of tone and attitude here may lay him open to the charge of false naivety, but it reveals an attention to human awareness and possible self-deception arguably more "nimble" than that of Tomlinson's "The Tree," which by comparison comes across as having designs on the reader and on the scene it would depict.

Swigg's account of Tomlinson's debt to Williams inadvertently betrays this tendency in the English poet. For instance, Swigg argues that Tomlinson's poem "Canal" (from *A Peopled Landscape*, 1963), while it "looks back . . . to the kind of patient, disclosing style" (96) of *Spring & All*, still outdoes Williams in its discriminations: "Quietly yet decisively, the human observer, via the swans, gives room and habitation to the pulse that could, with stronger beat, recivilize house and city" (99). The poem concludes with

the eye of the discriminating
swans that seek
for something else
and the blank brink
concludes them without conclusion. (Tomlinson, *CP* 65)

Swigg writes of "the poem's moral and visual exactness" (99), and he rightly claims that Tomlinson's characteristic moral stance is evident in the way the poem grounds its aspiration for "something else" in the actual and visible. But would Williams be happy concluding (albeit "without conclusion") a poem with that gesture toward "something else," or with the choked back despair of "the blank brink"?

"The language of possibilities," in Swigg's phrase, describes well the impulse behind much of Tomlinson's poetry. That language persuasively

fills the gap between the “degraded” urban realities and the poet’s vision, those “roots in the eye” of a poem such as “The Tree.” Tomlinson feels that he has to “coax [his] style from these disparities,” that he has to work against the grain of his material, whereas Williams’ style would make a new music out of the disparities. Williams’ poetry is content to move in a world of actualities, acknowledging even as it does so that the poet’s presence in his landscape is provisional and subject to vagaries of personality and perception, whereas Tomlinson’s frequently looks beyond the actual to conjure up possibilities. This characteristic tendency to imagine “unforeseen configurations,” however well-grounded, is more a confounding than an extension of Williams’ aesthetic. In terms of the present discussion, it represents the Stevensian pole of Tomlinson’s imagination, where “the image of an interiority” vies with the visible world, where landscape transforms into mindscape.

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Wallace Stevens and R. S. Thomas: Influence *sans* Anxiety

WILLIAM V. DAVIS

Our religion is the poetry in which we believe. . . . Poetry raised to its highest power is then identical with religion grasped in its inmost truth; at their point of union both reach their utmost purity and beneficence, for then poetry loses its frivolity and ceases to demoralize, while religion surrenders its illusions and ceases to deceive.

—George Santayana

IN HIS "LETTER ABOUT Mallarmé," Paul Valéry writes:

I From my first glance at his work it became . . . a subject for wonderment. . . . He played such a great part in my inner history without knowing it; he changed so many of my values merely by existing; his simple *act of presence* assured me of so many things, confirmed me in so many things, and, even more, has been an inner law forbidding me so many things, that I can hardly distinguish what he was from what he was to me. (240–41)

He adds:

No word comes easier or oftener to the critic's pen than the word *influence*, and no vaguer notion can be found among all the vague notions that compose the phantom armory of aesthetics. Yet there is nothing in the critical field that should be of greater philosophical interest or prove more rewarding to analysis than the progressive modification of one mind by the work of another. . . . Opposites are born from opposites. (241)

Valéry makes clear here that by *influence* he does not mean *imitation*—even if the earlier "work acquires a singular value in the other [writer's] mind" (241). He argues:

We say that an author is *original* when we cannot trace the hidden transformations that others underwent in his mind; we

mean to say that the dependence of *what he does* on *what others have done* is excessively complex and irregular. . . . It is when a book or an author's collected work acts on someone not with all its qualities, but with one or a few of them, that influence assumes its most remarkable values. The development of a single quality of one person by the full talent of another seldom fails to produce results marked by an *extreme originality*. (241–42)¹

Almost as if he is following up on Valéry's suggestion, Harold Bloom, in his studies of the history of poetic theory and practice, *The Anxiety of Influence* and *A Map of Misreading*, defines and documents what he calls "the anxiety of influence" as it affects poets and poetry during the past several centuries by charting the "influence" of "strong, authentic poets" on one another. Bloom argues that such an influence "always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation" of the one poet by the other. This "influence" and its attendant "anxiety" has, according to Bloom, been evident throughout "the main tradition of Western poetry since the Renaissance," and it constitutes a "history of anxiety and self-saving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, wilful revisionism without which modern poetry . . . could not exist" (*Anxiety* 30).²

Speaking of any two particular poets, Bloom argues that the later poet

holds his own poem so open . . . to the precursor's work that at first we might believe the wheel has come full circle, and that we are back in the later poet's flooded apprenticeship. . . . [A]nd the uncanny effect is that the new poem's achievement makes it seem to us, not as though the precursor were writing it, but as though the later poet himself had written the precursor's characteristic work. (*Anxiety* 15–16)

As controversial as Bloom's theory of the "anxiety of influence" is, and as interesting as Valéry's remarks are—granted that there are intriguing instances of such possible indebtedness between one poet and another—it is nonetheless unusual to find any "strong poet" *explicitly* claiming (or even overtly suggesting) a direct association between himself and an earlier poet as "precursor," in spite of the fact that this is precisely what critics often do, either explicitly or implicitly. Therefore, it is somewhat startling to find R. S. Thomas, the powerful Welsh poet, making such a specific assertion with respect to Wallace Stevens.

In his essay "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet," Stevens seems to support the Burckhardtian notion that "Poetry is the voice of religion" (*CPP* 683). If this is so, the contention that Stevens and Thomas shared a theologically based philosophy will not perhaps be a surprising or startling assertion, even though Thomas was a theist and Stevens was an ag-

nostic, if not an atheist. In spite of such seemingly different theological or philosophical perspectives, Stevens and Thomas shared a philosophy that, for all their apparent differences, was really very much the same. It was a philosophy with deeply theologic trappings, one which worked itself out in both men's thinking—both in their prose (where, in Stevens, it is often most explicit) and in their poetry.³ It is this theologically focused philosophy that might have caused Thomas, in a late poem, "Homage to Wallace Stevens," to assert:

I turn now
not to the Bible
but to Wallace Stevens.

*(Collected Later Poems 266)*⁴

This is a startlingly straightforward statement and a rather stunning one, coming from Thomas, whose daily life was and always had been a "turning" primarily to the Bible and to his practice as a parish priest. How did he come to such a conclusion, to such an assertion, and what was the basis of his relationship—and his indebtedness—to Stevens that would allow him to make such a statement? One answer might be based on Thomas' claim, "I think Wallace Stevens comes nearest to expressing the situation, in poetry" (see Thomas' interview with J. B. Lethbridge 56). Even so, as A. E. Dyson has remarked, Stevens "conjures religious notions away, with unflinching courtesy." Yet, as Dyson also notes, Thomas "increasingly" came to "conclusions akin to Stevens'" and these "conclusions" "haunt [Thomas'] work." The "echoes" that Thomas "sets up . . . between his poems" and those of Stevens are, Dyson believes, "mutually enriching and elusive" (306). As an instance of the reciprocal relationship between Thomas and Stevens and, in particular, in terms of what I have referred to as their "theologic trappings," Dyson says that Thomas' "assertions of God's absence seem as lucid as Wallace Stevens's, though far angrier" (323).

Thomas published three poems explicitly related to Stevens. Two of them, "Wallace Stevens" and "Homage to Wallace Stevens," directly address Stevens and describe Thomas' indebtedness to him as man, poet, and precursor. Another poem, "Thirteen Blackbirds Look at a Man," is primarily indebted to Stevens poetically; it is Thomas' almost antiphonal response to Stevens' well-known early poem, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." (Because I have already considered Thomas' early poem "Thirteen Blackbirds Look at a Man" in an earlier essay—see "'An Abstraction Blooded'"—I will here address only Thomas' "Wallace Stevens" and "Homage to Wallace Stevens.")⁵

"Wallace Stevens" begins by describing Stevens' conception and birth:

On New Year's night after a party

His father lay down and made him
In the flesh of a girl out of Holland.
The baby was dropped at the first fall
Of the leaf. . . . (CP 135)

Stevens was born on October 2 and thus it is entirely possible that he was “made” on “New Year’s night.”⁶ This rather earthy description of Stevens’ conception is quickly followed by an equally “natural” description of Stevens’ birth. He was “dropped,” like an animal in a field, or like a leaf in autumn during the time of “the first fall / Of the leaf.” In either case it is as if he were a “thing” “in a fall in a world of fall.”⁷

This child, conceived so arbitrarily,

was for years dumb,
Mumbling the dry crust
Of poetry, until the teeth grew,
Ivory of a strange piano.⁸

Stevens, as Thomas imagines him here, prefers not the white keys of his piano (“They were too white”), but the black ones, which are reminiscent of

The deep spaces between stars,
Fathomless as the cold shadow
His mind cast.⁹

The word “Fathomless” is clearly a touchstone word and reference for Thomas. It is a conspicuously Kierkegaardian reference and, as I have tried to show elsewhere (see “‘At the Foot of the Precipice’”), Thomas was deeply influenced by Kierkegaard. In particular, he was enamored with Kierkegaard’s metaphor of the “seventy thousand fathoms.”¹⁰ But Thomas also seems to be using the word “fathomless” here in terms of multiple meanings. He goes beyond the Kierkegaardian context to suggest that the “cast” (another pun?) of Stevens’ mind was both beyond comprehension and, simultaneously, that it was a mind that was difficult to prove or to take “soundings” from. In short, Stevens’ mind was, for Thomas, “deep” and “unfathomable” (as Thomas’ mind often seems to be to his readers). Thus Thomas here, “In the bleak autumn / Of real time,” “without eloquence,” eloquently remembers Stevens’ birth.

The second section of the poem begins with lines in which Thomas refers directly to Stevens but, again, they might well apply or be applied to Thomas himself—lines that, at least from the first comma on, Thomas must surely have been thinking of in terms of himself as well as of Stevens:

How like him to bleed at last
Inwardly, but to the death,

Who all his life from the white page
Infected us chiefly with fear
Of the veins' dryness.

The enjambment of these lines—combined with Thomas' characteristic, indeed quintessential, line breaks and the way he inevitably emphasizes and compounds the complexities of his meanings by the judicious use of the white spaces at the ends of his enjambed lines—are conspicuous here. Each of these line-turns amends or revises the anticipated sense of the statement being built up in the previous line and thus each subtly changes the poem's meaning, line by line. The first turn, from "bleed at last" to "Inwardly," simultaneously amends the anticipated meaning (since the internal bleeding is not fatal, as the initial suggestion seems to imply or suggest) and it forces an exterior "bleeding" into an "interior," where (it might be argued and assumed) such bleeding would not be immediately harmful, and certainly not likely fatal. Indeed, this "bleeding," as we learn from the continuation of the line, is not fatal, at least not in an "inner" metaphorical sense. The "bleeding" is also ironic and punningly accurate since we all "bleed inwardly" as our blood circulates through our bodies. When that internal "bleeding" stops, we do die. But then, in the midst of his sentence, Thomas turns his metaphor to force it away from the literal (whether exterior or interior) and into an aesthetic sense or meaning. The "white page" written on by the "black keys" of the pen, or the type of a typed page, affect and "infect" us with the *fear* of death itself. More specifically, they affect us with the fear of death by literature—the fear that our "veins'" words will run dry, that we will not have blood "bleeding" back to the heart so that it can be pumped out again and circulated throughout the whole of the body and throughout the whole of the body of our work, our poems. In this way, we may literally die "inwardly," or at least we may "fear" such an inward death, a loss of literature.

Then Thomas changes the metaphor for a second time—although the abiding sense and presence of a death lingers over the remaining lines of the stanza as well:

Words he shed
Were dry leaves of a dry mind,
Crackling as the wind blew
From mortuaries of the cold heart.

The words, the "dry crust / Of poetry" mentioned in lines 7–8 of section 1, are here "shed," written, printed, and published, like the "dry leaves of a dry mind" (with its echo of T. S. Eliot). Both Stevens and Thomas, arguably, were men of principally autumnal or wintry minds and thus their Whitmanian "leaves" of poems (as well as what they have left us) invariably, almost inevitably, "fall" from and into autumnal or wintry seasons

from the "mortuaries" of "cold heart[s]." ¹¹ These "leaves," however, are still animated, "alive" in the sense that everything falls from, follows from, such seasons, as Stevens reminds us in the imperative opening line of his seminal early poem, "The Snow Man." (Certainly, "The Snow Man" was an important poem for Thomas and there are echoes of it in several of his poems.) In Thomas' rendition of this theme, he alludes to Eliot's "Gerontion," in addition to Stevens' "The Snow Man," to "crackle" the dry leaves in the mortuaries of a heart that has been "cold a long time" (CPP 8). ¹² In these kinds of "mortuaries" the self is "ripe, but without taste."

In the final three lines of the poem, Thomas changes his metaphor again. He depicts Stevens as "limp[ing]" "on the poem's crutch" and "taking despair / As a new antidote for love." Here Thomas may well be suggesting a basic contrast between himself and Stevens, this man and poet with whom he knows he shares so much. If Stevens, at the end of Thomas' poem, is stoically "limping" with the help of "the poem's crutch" toward his final assertion of "despair" as an "antidote for love," for Thomas love remains healthy, without the need of any antidote or cure, and it is this love that will provide Thomas with all the "crutch" he will need to continue to write his own poems.

"Homage to Wallace Stevens" was published in Thomas' final collection of poems, *No Truce with the Furies*. It begins with the surprising, startling, almost sacrilegious statement:

I turn now
not to the Bible
but to Wallace Stevens. (CLP 266)

Beyond its initial surprise, this is a serious and, I think, an accurate description of Thomas' poetic and "religious" indebtedness to Stevens. Thomas always acknowledges his debts, and here he is simply saying what has long been true, namely that, as a poet, he reveres, even reverences, Stevens. Even so, Thomas is not above playfully alluding to Stevens (who was an insurance executive in his workaday world) as being "Insured against / everything but the muse" and the fitful turnings she might make him make and by then asking what Stevens "the word-wizard / [has] to say" for himself.

Then Thomas returns to Stevens, saying for him (and implying that he also said it for himself) that "We walk a void world" in which

in the absence of the imagination,
there is no hope.

This "void world" is thus, simultaneously, both Stevens' and Thomas'. But the image also suggests not simply a vacant, empty, or deserted world, but a "world" that is being voided, or avoided, for the sake of the imagination,

for the sake of the imaginative "world." Thus, Thomas seems to suggest—both for himself and for Stevens—that the world exists more substantially in the imagination than it does as a physically palpable entity or reality. Furthermore, there is the implication that without imagination there is "no hope." Hope, for Thomas, would no doubt be linked with faith, as in "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1 KJV).¹³ (This is a statement that would probably be true for Stevens, too, if we take it at face value and outside of its biblical context.)

Next Thomas characterizes Stevens as a "Verbal bank-clerk," an "acrobat walking a rhythmic tight-rope," and a "trapeze artist of the language," and he says that "his was a kind of double-entry / poetics." This tripartite description seems initially to allude to Eliot, a literal bank clerk in London, who would have been familiar with double-entry bookkeeping. More pertinently, in terms of Bloom's anxiety theory and in terms of the reciprocal relationship between Thomas and Stevens, this reference suggests a kind of giving and taking (or receiving) between the two poets such that the "debits" and the "credits" seem almost to course backward and forward in an even flow between them. Like Stevens, Thomas too "kept two columns / of thought going" simultaneously, all the while "balancing meaning" between them.¹⁴

The other two referents are more interesting poetically. Thomas makes his tight-rope walker a literal "acrobat" who performs interesting "gymnastic feats requiring skillful control" and is also "adept at swiftly changing his position" (Webster's) or point of view in mid-air as it were. In this sense, Thomas' "acrobat" is a high-flying trapeze artist dazzling the crowds below him with his jumps and somersaults in mid-air—and, surely, without a net.

In the final comparison he makes between Stevens and himself, Thomas turns to a theological metaphor by saying that Stevens' "poetry / was his church," that he "burned his metaphors like incense," and that "his syntax was as high / as his religion." Beyond the suggestion of the fragrant scent or odor released when his metaphors are "burned," Thomas seems to imply (perhaps more pertinently for himself than for Stevens) that some of those metaphors also incensed (in the sense of causing confusion or even anger) when they were "burned" into the lines of poems. Certainly, at many times in his often controversial life Thomas incensed groups or individuals in terms of the stances he took with respect to social, political, and theological matters.

The clause "his syntax was as high / as his religion" contains several puns. Literally, beyond a "connected or orderly system" of words, syntax is also the "harmonious arrangement of parts or elements" (Webster's) of speech that must be clearly evidenced in poetry. Thomas thus seems to be suggesting a reference to Stevens' first book, *Harmonium*, as well as to the fact that Stevens felt that the whole of his poetic career consisted of one single overarching harmonious movement, "The Whole of Harmonium"

(see *L* 831). Further, since Stevens had no “religion” save his poetry, Thomas seems to be suggesting that Stevens’ “syntax” was as “high” as his, Thomas’, “religion”—as high, that is, in terms of Thomas’ position as a priest in the Anglican Church in Wales.

Thomas’ poem concludes:

Blessings, Stevens;
I stand with my back to grammar
at an altar you never aspired
to, celebrating the sacrament
of the imagination whose high-priest
notwithstanding you are.

These final lines, beginning with the only break in the poem from the hard left-hand margin, create the sense of a separate stanza or a concluding paragraph in a commemorative address. They directly address Stevens in a most intriguing way, since Thomas uses a word (“Blessings”) that is inevitably associated with religious innuendo—and would certainly be so seen by a priest.

This, then, is an extremely important passage, not only in terms of Thomas’ relationship with Stevens, but also in terms of his own life both as poet and as priest. During most of Thomas’ ministry, the priest—as ministrant to and for the people—faced the altar when he celebrated the Mass. When the Church changed the liturgy and the priest was asked to turn around to face the congregation—and thus forced to turn his back on the altar—Thomas refused to participate further in the services.¹⁵ Clearly, these details would seem to be relevant to Thomas’ reference in this poem. When Thomas says that he stands with his “back to grammar,” he must mean that in turning *to* God, as priest, he turns *away from* the mundane and the human, or even that he turns away from man’s grammatical rules of literature and language—all for the sake of the sacred ceremony.¹⁶ He does this, as priest and poet, before an altar Stevens “never aspired / to.” Even so, in so celebrating Stevens, Thomas defines his own action and activity here as “celebrating the sacrament / of the imagination”—the sacrament of poetry—that same “sacrament” that Stevens “aspired” to, and whose “high-priest,” Thomas insists, Stevens—notwithstanding any protests to the contrary—is.

In short, here at the end of his final poem on and for Wallace Stevens, Thomas, like Stevens himself, turns to and stands before the altar of the imagination—the altar of poetry.

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¹ Valéry then goes on to describe how “At the still rather tender age of twenty . . . I suffered the impact of Mallarmé’s work . . . I felt myself becoming a sort of fanatic; I had to undergo the overwhelming progress of a decisive spiritual conquest. . . . The heinous train of thought—and a dangerous one for literature . . . was combined in a contradictory fashion with my admiration for a man who, by following his own, had reached a point nothing short of deifying the written word” (244, 249). Valéry concludes that “it might have been of some interest to pursue the analysis of a particular case of *influence* in depth and detail, to show the direct and contradictory effects of a certain work on a certain mind, and to explain how a tendency towards one extreme is answered by another. . . . I concluded that Mallarmé must have an inner system to be distinguished from that of the philosopher and, in a different fashion, from that of the mystics, yet revealing some analogies with both” (253, 248).

² In *Kabbalah and Criticism*, Bloom extends this notion to readers or critics: “The reader is to the poem what the poet is to his precursor—every reader is therefore an ephebe, every poem a forerunner, and every reading an act of ‘influencing,’ that is, of being influenced *by* the poem and of influencing any other reader to whom your reading is communicated. Reading is therefore misprision—or misreading—just as writing is” (97).

³ In “A Collect of Philosophy” Stevens writes that “the idea of God is the ultimate poetic idea” (CPP 859). Stevens would surely have been remembering here that one of the definitions of “collect” is “a short prayer.” In his essay “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet,” he describes poets as “the peers of saints” (CPP 674); in a letter to Hi Simons he says, “I write poetry because it is part of my piety” (L 473); and in a letter to Henry Church he writes that his “own way out toward the future involves a confidence in the spiritual role of the poet” (L 340). I have attempted to describe Stevens’ “philosophical search” throughout the course of his career and to document its climax in his late poem “Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself” (see “This Refuge”).

⁴ Hereafter, Thomas’ poems will be referred to as *CP* for *Collected Poems* and *CLP* for *Collected Later Poems*.

⁵ In two other late poems, Thomas mentions Stevens. See “Negative” (CLP 254) and “Anybody’s Alphabet” (CLP 292–96). John Powell Ward identifies two additional poems related to Stevens: “Winter Starlings” (*Tares* 36), which, Ward says, “echoe[s]” Stevens, and “Mrs. Li” (*The Bread of Truth* 21), which, he argues, has its “direct source in Wallace Stevens” and is “clearly an antiphonal poem to Stevens’s ‘To The One Of Fictive Music’ ” (74). Further, as Tony Brown reports, “In a letter to me of 8 June 2002, Ward draws attention to ‘The Conductor’ [CP 100], published in *Tares* (1961), as possibly owing something to Stevens. This seems a very shrewd suggestion: the poem certainly shares something of the tranquility of poems like ‘The Idea of Order at Key West’; it is set on the shore ‘at the end of the day’ and, as in the Stevens poem, the person makes (or in this case imagines) music in a natural landscape” (130). If it is the case that “The Conductor” “owes something” to Stevens (and this seems to me a somewhat tenuous suggestion), then I would add “The Musician” (CP 104) as another possibility in this mix, since “The Musician” certainly seems related to “The Conductor.” M. Wynn Thomas’ suggestion that Thomas’ poem beginning “It was winter” in *The Echoes Return Slow* (CLP 26) “may . . . be read as Thomas’s distinctive response to Wallace Stevens’s famous observation that ‘one must have a mind of winter’ ” (197) seems even less plausible, unless he intends “distinctive” to mean “having or giving style or distinction” as opposed to “capable of making a segment of utterance different in meaning as well as in sound from an otherwise identical utterance” (Webster’s), as I would tend to take it. Finally, it is intriguing that “The Idea of Order at Key West”

has also been cited by Geoffrey Hill in terms of Thomas. In discussing the necessity that the poet “imagine the making of his own language in the immediate process of making it” (45), Hill compares Stevens’ theme in “The Idea of Order at Key West” to Thomas’ “Wallace Stevens” and says that Thomas’ poem “regards Stevens only in the aspect of thought or opinion; and therefore cannot move beyond the impression of ‘cold’ ascribed to a despairing hedonist. One could as well call Thomas a despairing hedonist” (57).

On several other occasions, Thomas mentioned Stevens in ways that suggest his indebtedness to him. In an interview from 1990, Thomas says, “Literature . . . is the supreme human statement” (which seems a clear echo of Stevens’ notion of poetry as the “supreme fiction”) and he then quotes Stevens’ poem “Chocorua to Its Neighbor”: “To say more than human things with human voice, / That cannot be; to say human things with more / Than human voice, that, also, cannot be; / To speak humanly from the height or from the depth / Of human things, that is acutest speech.” Thomas adds, “We must remain articulate to the end” (see my *Miraculous Simplicity* 34). Then, near the end of his own life, Thomas, in an interview with Graham Turner, refers to Stevens’ statement, “Poetry must resist the intelligence almost successfully” (*Daily Telegraph* 7). Also, in a BBC radio program in 2000, Thomas mentions Stevens’ “Peter Parasol” among several literary texts that, as Brown reports, “had given him pleasure” (112).

It is also worth remembering that Thomas included Stevens’ “*Common Soldier*,” the first of Stevens’ 1914–1915 “Lettres d’un Soldat,” in his edition of the *Penguin Book of Religious Verse* (1963). The second tercet of “*Common Soldier*” no doubt resonated with circumstances in Thomas’ life: “I have been pupil under bishops’ rods / And got my learning from the orthodox. / I mark the virtue of the common-place.”

⁶ Cf. Thomas’ poem “Album,” in which he describes his own father who “went looking for me / in the woman . . .” (*CP* 350).

⁷ I am here quoting Charles Wright’s poem “Snow” (*China Trace* 14). Wright is often thinking of Stevens, and in many ways Stevens was an autumnal or wintry poet, as Wright is.

⁸ Andrew Rudd says that this passage “almost quotes Stevens himself: ‘That’s it. The lover writes, the believer hears, / The poet mumbles’” (49). He reminds us of Helen Vendler’s definition of a poet as one who is always “mumbling to oneself,” as well as of Thomas’ own lines about his taking “truth / In my mouth and mumb[ling] it / . . . till my teeth / Grew” (qtd. in Rudd 49).

⁹ Tony Brown points out that the phrase, “The deep spaces between stars,” “recalls Robert Frost’s ‘Desert Places’ and those ‘empty spaces / Between stars . . . where no human race is’” (114). This “echo of Frost,” which is “surely revealing and far from coincidental,” is, according to Brown, indicative of the “sense of spiritual loneliness [that] seems to haunt [Thomas’] poems of this period” (115). Certainly, Brown is right in noting this bow to Frost (although it is well known that Thomas was not a Frost fan) and right in seeing what Thomas here admired in Stevens, since Stevens was, as Brown says, “a poet who placed the highest possible value on the power of the poetic imagination, on individual intellectual creativity, in a world which . . . was otherwise empty of secure meaning” (117).

¹⁰ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* 334. In his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard argues: “Without risk there is no faith. Faith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of the individual’s inwardness and the objective uncertainty. If I am capable of grasping God objectively, I do not believe, but precisely because I cannot do this I must believe. If I wish to preserve myself in faith I must constantly be intent upon holding fast the objective uncertainty, so as to remain out upon the deep, over seventy thousand fathoms of water, still preserving my faith” (182).

¹¹ Note that Thomas describes Stevens’ world by saying, “His one season was late fall” in the final stanza of this poem. Brown objects to Thomas’ limiting Stevens to

"one season" and argues that this is a "partial," "ultimately inadequate" and "demonstrably not true" account of "[t]he cycle of the seasons" in Stevens. In addition, Brown castigates Thomas for ignoring "the colour," the "ludic exoticism," and the "sensual gaiety" present in much of Stevens. He concludes that Thomas' poem "tell[s] us rather more about Thomas at this point in his imaginative career than it does about Stevens" (114–15). One wonders if this is not often, or always, the case in poems by one poet on another.

¹² In "Gerontion," Eliot imagines "an old man in a dry month," in a "decayed house," "waiting for rain" and for a "sign." This man will witness the coming of "Christ the tiger" (29).

¹³ Thomas reports that he always "clung to the King James Bible and to the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, considering the language of both to be indescribably superior" to other versions or translations (*Autobiographies* 88–89). Justin Wintle reports on an occasion in which Thomas "arrive[d] at a cathedral to read some of his poems at a service, and stomp[ed] off in a huff when he discovered a modern version of the Bible would be used" (373).

¹⁴ Perhaps the best examples of Thomas' own "double-entry poetics" are to be found in *The Echoes Return Slow*, which contains some of his most personal and some of his most autobiographical poems. Throughout this book the prose poems and the poems in lines face each other, antiphonally responding to one another page by page.

¹⁵ In his autobiographical essay, "A Year in Llŷn," Thomas describes his position with respect to the change in the church liturgy: "It pains me greatly, but ever since the Church reformed the Liturgy, I cannot partake of the Sacrament. The new order of the Church in Wales has changed the whole atmosphere of Holy Communion for me. The pinnacle of the original service was when I, as a priest, would say the words of consecration over the bread and wine, with my back to the congregation as one who had the honour of leading them to the throne of God's grace. But now it is the congregation that the priest faces, inviting them to speak, as he breaks the synthetic wafer before them. It is to God that mystery belongs, and woe to man when he tries to interfere with that mystery" (*Autobiographies* 131).

¹⁶ This "turning," combined with the "turn" at the opening of the poem ("I turn now / not to the Bible / but to Wallace Stevens") is reminiscent of the "turnings" that open and close Eliot's "Ash Wednesday" ("Because I do not hope to turn again" [85]; "Although I do not hope to turn again" [94]), even if Thomas' resolution of his dilemma is rather different from Eliot's. Still, it is possible that Thomas wished to evoke Eliot both in terms of this rather specific allusion and also in terms of his similar theme. "Ash Wednesday" is the first important poem in Eliot's career in which, according to Eric Thompson, he initiates his "recurrent theme" (81) of the use and misuse of poetry, and Thomas may well be thinking along these lines as well. Certainly, Eliot's lines are "crabbed lines" that, as F. O. Matthiessen says, "suggest turning in their very denial of its hope," lines in which the rhythm "suggests the movement of the mind of the poet back and forth from doubt to acceptance" (119).

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Unnecessary Angels: Patrick Mackie, Jeremy Over, and Their Use of Wallace Stevens

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ONE NOTABLE THING that the first collections of two British poets, Patrick Mackie and Jeremy Over, have in common is that they contain poems that make reference to work by Wallace Stevens. Mackie's *Excerpts from the Memoirs of a Fool* includes a poem called "The Unnecessary Angel"; Over's *A Little Bit of Bread and No Cheese* features poems with the titles "The Irrational Element in Poetry" and "A Poem is a Pheasant." The emergence of these two writers—around a time when perhaps the poet most commonly cited as influencing the somewhat stodgy "New Generation" of British poets is W. H. Auden—could be viewed as a significant challenge to the prevailing fashion.

Although the two debuts were published by Carcanet in 2001, both poets had previously featured work in Carcanet's 1999 showcase anthology, *New Poetries II*. In the introduction to that book, its editor, Michael Schmidt, notes that the influence of Stevens' poetry does appear evident in the work of several of the thirteen poets whose work is collected there. Reviewing the anthology in the *Daily Telegraph*, Grey Gowrie picks up on this editorial comment and suggests that it might be possible to go further and to identify "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" as the single Stevens poem whose influence is most obvious on this selection of new writers.

A brief look at the Mackie and Over books would suggest a number of areas where each might have things in common with Stevens: Mackie has an interest in French poetry, with *Excerpts* including translations from René Char, and he has other poems where, like Stevens, he discusses directly the use of metaphor in poetry ("Metaphor"); Over plays the Stevensian game of writing poems whose relation to their titles is not immediately clear ("Stumbling on Melons"; "I sometimes conceal my tracks from all mankind"), and the structure of his poems often depends as much on numbered sections as on simple stanzaic divisions. Then again, it might be argued that these features are of a type that could be found in the work of many poets on whom the work of Stevens has no bearing at all. Suffi-

ciently generalized, all things could, after all, be said to resemble everything else.

But my reason for focusing on these two poets has less to do with the way that each, fairly broadly, could be said to bear the influence of Stevens' writing than with the way they both write poems that make particular reference to specific examples of Stevens' work. Interestingly, it is Stevens' essays and aphorisms, rather than the poems, that provide the starting points for Mackie and Over.

Although the only direct reference to Stevens in Mackie's poem "The Unnecessary Angel" comes from its title, it could be argued that Mackie is trading in more than hat-tipping allusion. As a poet at the beginning of his career, Mackie could be seen to be requisitioning Stevens' work as part of a strategy, claiming an allegiance to it in a way that will distinguish him from other emerging British poets. He also sets up allegiances with other writers and artists, writing poems in homage to the German photographer and artist Wols (Alfred Otto Wolfgang Schulze) and in memoriam Octavio Paz. In making the slight transformation from the title of Stevens' essay collection, *The Necessary Angel*, to "The Unnecessary Angel" of his own poem, Mackie is finding a playful way to exert a touch of individual order. In fact, he is not simply going through the process of "writing through" his influences, as developing writers are generally said to do. The writers he refers to are not commonly mentioned on the British poetry scene. By commandeering Stevens' essay collection in this way, he is acting deliberately—perhaps independently. In other words, although Mackie is undeniably influenced by Stevens in terms of subject matter, it is debatable whether he is influenced on the level of diction.

There is certainly enough in this poem to suggest that Mackie is not merely using Stevens as a way of bluffing the reader. I quote "The Unnecessary Angel" in its entirety:

As evening came, someone was seen wandering out into the fields. The hills trembled calmly. Birds were flying in swift formation swoops. He could just about be seen in the strained-into, somehow bright dusk.

* * *

Having come here to hear rain slurped quietly by the springy spring ground, having come to feel the soaked grass give surprisingly lushly underfoot, to see the rich layering of forms around the edges of the woody areas, to notice the distant swishing of streams, the thrushes singing then not singing, or the infinitesimal darkening of the rough hill-tops, to watch the airy shadows of birds touching the twitching branches, he walked and walked.

* * *

So the condition became one of enormous width. This of course isn't describable, but think of it as a kind of failure of anything to be near anything any more: the surroundings expanded, the expandings surrounded: at every juncture distance loomed, at every cross-roads the two roads turned out to have another hundred yards before they met each other, leaves dangled far off from their branches, and the branches were in any case suspended in the dim air, far away from their trunks, while the birds spread from each other into isolated corners of the panorama. He came to feel a certain sensation of flotation, a basic airiness. When he spoke, his voice raced ahead of him to the horizon, pronouncing in every direction things he had not yet thought of. (45)¹

The way in which the objects and events evoked here—the birds, hills, and fields, say—are actual to the poem without making actual reference to actual things in the actual world might amount to something learned from Stevens. The way Mackie works the trick of increasing the pressure as each section of the poem takes place might be compared with the way Stevens manipulates distinct sections in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" or "Sunday Morning." It is to move from description or narrative to something more philosophically far-reaching. Maybe in a poem such as this, Mackie is, like Stevens, discussing the imagination.

But if Mackie is concerned with the imagination itself and the abstract quality of a voice that "raced ahead of him to the horizon, pronouncing in every direction things he had not yet thought of," why should his angel be "unnecessary"? Naturally, the poem resists a definitive answer. But if we think of Stevens' angel as in some sense "necessary" because it plugs the gap, enabling a spiritual and human poetry in the wake of "the death of the gods"—or even, more singularly, the demise of Christianity—then Mackie's "unnecessary" angel is one that exists simply for itself: without being the necessary quality that fills Stevens' early twentieth-century vacuum. Of course, it is debatable whether Stevens' angel fulfills the function of filling a spiritual void (in "Angel Surrounded by Paysans," it merely enables its auditor to "see the earth again" [CPP 423]). But the positive inability of Mackie's "he" to arrive at any location, or even to take on the identity of an angel by name—Stevens' angel, remember, speaks in the first person, "I am the necessary angel of earth"—gives us a less metaphysically inscribed creature. In other words, Mackie's angel is even more abstract, in a positive sense, than Stevens' figure, fulfilling, paradoxically speaking, "a basic airiness."

If Mackie begins by making reference to a Stevens poem and continues by exhibiting some techniques borrowed from the earlier poet, Jeremy Over's methods are perhaps a little more radical. His poem "A Poem is a Pheasant" begins with a line from Stevens' "Adagia," but the way in which

he moves outward from the aphorism to create a new poem owes more to the mathematical techniques of the Oulipo (Ouvroir de littérature potentielle) group. This is fairly typical of Over's work. "A Poem is a Pheasant" is one of a number of cut-up poems. Others include "Daubed Loops," a syntactically elegant page-long reworking of a single sentence by Gerhard Richter, and "This Is Just To Say" and "And Another Thing," both of which are responses to William Carlos Williams' "This Is Just to Say." Over's references to other writers also go a little further than those of Mackie. If assembling a book where the poems make continual references to work by other writers can be compared to putting together a mix-tape, then Over's compilation is made up largely of remixes. Where his poems are based on source texts he takes from other writers, parts of the originals survive the process intact, if, perhaps, a little disfigured.

This is "A Poem is a Pheasant":

It is not every day that the world arranges itself in a pheasant.
A pheasant should stimulate the sense of living and of being alive.
A pheasant is the gaiety of language.
A pheasant is a composite of the propositions about it.
A pheasant is not personal.
A pheasant is a means of redemption.
A pheasant is a café.
Money is a kind of pheasant.
Society is a sea.
The tongue is an eye.
Authors are actors, books are theatres, pheasants are pheasants.
Everything tends to become a pheasant; or moves in the direction of pheasants.
Every pheasant is a pheasant within a pheasant: the pheasant of the idea within the pheasant of the words.
There is nothing in life except what a pheasant thinks of it.
Pheasants take the place of thoughts.
We live in the mind of a pheasant.
Pheasants tend to collect in pools.
One reads poetry with one's pheasant.
All pheasants are experimental pheasants.
Pheasants must resist the intelligence almost successfully.
A pheasant need not have a meaning and, like most things in nature, often does not have.

Every pheasant dies his own death.
The death of one pheasant is the death of all.
The loss of a pheasant creates confusion or dumbness.
The acquisition of a pheasant is fortuitous: a trouvaille.
A poem sometimes crowns the search for happiness. It
is itself a search for pheasants. (46)²

If Over's starting point here is Stevens' aphorism "A poem is a pheasant" (CPP 907), the poem progresses by folding in parts of other Stevens aphorisms, dodging forward and backward and sometimes running in circles. There are three main methods by which Over creates his poem: in the lines "A pheasant is a café" or "Money is a kind of pheasant," he is using "pheasant" as a substitute for the word "poem" or "poetry" (CPP 909, 905); in the lines "One reads poetry with one's pheasant" and "Every pheasant dies his own death," he is expanding the range of words substituted, here replacing "nerves" and "man," respectively (CPP 919, 905); and in the lines "Society is a sea" and "The tongue is an eye" (CPP 908, 907), he is simply lifting the original sentence without changing it.

Besides noting the way Mackie and Over take their direction from Stevens or use his work to suggest a context in which their own poems might be read, it might be asked whether there are any ways in which these poets' work can offer new ways of going back to and reviewing Stevens' writing. One obvious suggestion is that these poems serve as a reminder of the breadth of Stevens' writing, emphasizing his prose alongside his poetry. Conversely, the British poets' work underlines the narrowness or obsessive focus of Stevens—the very similarity of subject matter, themes, and techniques running through the poems and the prose. A final view might concern the way Stevens offers these two poets a way of taking their bearings that, in a sense, resembles the way Stevens takes his own bearings and develops his own poetic stance. In poems such as "Nomad Exquisite" or "The Pleasures of Merely Circulating," the mood of the poem is equal to the mood of the things the poem describes. In the formal certainty of a poem such as "The Man with the Blue Guitar," Stevens is able to operate with a hard-won lightness of touch (a poem he revised repeatedly during its composition). Perhaps this is comparable to the way in which, in "A Poem is a Pheasant," by acknowledging the solidity of Stevens' repertoire, Over can allow himself the license to have a little serious fun.

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Notes

¹ Quoted in full with the kind permission of Carcanet Press.

² Quoted in full with the kind permission of Carcanet Press.

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[Foot]Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction: Stevens, Frank Kermode, and the John Rylands University Library

STELLA HALKYARD

EXCEPT FOR BRIEF visits to Canada and Cuba, Wallace Stevens never left the United States of America. It might, therefore, seem strange that one of the most important archival collections of the poet's work should find a permanent home in the John Rylands University Library, at the University of Manchester, England. One could argue that such a fate could be only fitting for the great modern poet of the imagination. In 1948 Stevens wrote to Barbara Church:

I practically lived in France when old Mr. Vidal was alive because if I had asked him to procure from an obscure fromagerie in the country some of the cheese with raisins in it of which I read one time, he would have done it and that is almost what living in France or anywhere else amounts to. In what sense do I live in America if I walk to and fro from the office day after day. (L 610)

Yet France and England were vastly different imaginative spaces for Stevens, and his cautiousness where the English are concerned is well documented. In 1948, he wrote to Thomas McGreevy:

The truth is that American poetry is at its worst in England and, possibly in Ireland or in any other land where English is spoken and whose inhabitants feel that somehow our English is a vulgar imitation. (L 597)

These words arise out of a particular historical moment in Anglo-American literary relations when the insulated ears of English readers, editors, and critics (in contrast with their Scottish, Irish, and Welsh counterparts) were perhaps not thoroughly attuned to the voice of American poetry. As Charles Tomlinson records, the English poet George Barker, in an article published in *Poetry London* in 1948, uses a quotation from William Carlos

Williams' *Paterson* to assert that "American poetry is a very easy subject to discuss for the simple reason it does not exist" (1).

These days there is a better understanding of how the song of the American self has enriched, transformed, and reinvented English-language poetry with its narratives, metaphors, rhythms, and idioms. Today, even the English concede that the English language is nobody's special property, and if Clive Wilmer is right, most serious readers of poetry would agree that "it is the United States rather than Britain that has led the English poetry of our age" (x). The story of this awakening in the consciousness of English poetry readers provides the context in which a collection of letters and other manuscripts relating to a quintessential American poet of Wallace Stevens' stature came to reside in a British university library.

The history of Stevens' reception in Britain is a relatively well-established area of research. One of the greatest Stevens scholars, Frank Kermode, explained, in the 1989 edition of his book entitled *Wallace Stevens*:

It would not be quite true to say in 1960, when this little book first appeared, the work of Wallace Stevens was of no interest to British readers of poetry, for there were some devotees. (xi)

Kermode records how during the 1930s and 1940s a few of Stevens' poems appeared in British magazines and refers his readers to George Lensing's research concerning the failed attempt on the part of the English poet Nicholas Moore and [Meary James Thurairajah] Tambimuttu to publish a selection of Stevens' poetry as a *Poetry London* edition, as well as the fiasco of the illegal publishing of a *Selected Poems* by the Fortune Press, which had to be suppressed. Kermode recalls William Empson's review in *The Listener* of Stevens' *Selected Poems* that argued that here was a poet who had been admired in America for thirty years and that " 'it is time he was better known here' " (xi). Kermode outlines how in the 1950s he convinced the BBC to broadcast a reading of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" on the "Third Programme" with what he describes as "a somewhat rapt commentary by me" (xii).

All of this is a matter of record. What is perhaps less well known is that from 1958 to 1965—that is, during the period when interest in Stevens was truly beginning to flourish in Britain—Kermode was a professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Manchester. In his memoir, *Not Entitled*, Kermode characterizes Manchester University as having "a kind of grim friendliness and a justified assurance of its own value" (205). Of the John Rylands Library, he goes on to say:

For the work that interested me at the time, the Rylands was a more than adequate library. I had imagined that I should need to be continually in the train, heading for the British Museum; but I hardly ever needed to go there. (209–10)

The subtext of this story is to expect the unexpected of the University of Manchester. Into such a context comes a letter from Harry Duncan of the Cummington Press, whose reputation as a printer places him among the finest of those involved in the private press movement since the Second World War. The letter is dated August 10, 1963, and is clearly a reply to a letter sent by Kermodé that is either now lost or lies buried in a cupboard in the Department of English and American Studies. Duncan excuses his tardiness in replying, explaining that he has been having trouble making up his mind about whether to sell the Stevens letters he has in his keeping. But he assures Kermodé that he will send on the whole package, including the Cummington Press side of the correspondence, on the morrow. The letter closes as follows:

The matter of price, however, I've not been able to decide. Won't you make me an offer after you've read the letters and/if you should still want them for the Library? (Letter from Harry Duncan to Frank Kermodé, August 10, 1963)

The next letter in the series, again from Duncan, is dated September 11, 1963, and accepts the offer made of \$550 by Kermodé on behalf of Manchester University's Library, describing the offer as "very satisfactory" (Letter from Harry Duncan to Frank Kermodé, September 11, 1963). Thus, an agreement is reached. The record that completes the transaction is a copy letter from an S. Roberts of the University Library. He tells Kermodé that a check is on its way to Harry Duncan and closes his letter with the hope that Kermodé has had a good journey and managed to cope with his books. The address given for Kermodé at the time is the Center for Advanced Studies, Wesleyan University, Connecticut, where, all being well, books and all, he was dwelling poetically.

Having won the Stevens manuscripts for the University of Manchester, Kermodé could not have predicted that they would shape the structure of future collecting at the Rylands in the area of recent and contemporary poetries in English. Today the Rylands houses the letters and manuscripts of an impressive array of American poets embedded within the archives of the Carcanet Press, *PN Review*, and *Critical Quarterly*, as well as the papers of Michael Schmidt, Brian Cox, and Dom Sylvester Houédard, to name but a few. From our historical viewpoint, if we take Marc Bloch's advice and "read history backwards" (qtd. in Ginzburg 101), Kermodé's acquisition of the Stevens Collection represents the polished cornerstone and sure foundation from which the larger structure of the Collection of Modern Literary Archives gets its support. We experience its acquisition with the sense of a beginning rather than an ending.

The contents of the Rylands Collection relates to the prehistory, production, publication, and reception of three of Stevens' works in their particular embodiment as books crafted by the renowned private press at the

Cummington School of the Arts in Massachusetts: *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* (1942), *Esthétique du Mal* (1945), and *Three Academic Pieces* (1947). These were very different projects: *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* was written especially for the Cummington Press, although *Esthétique du Mal* and *Three Academic Pieces* had already been published elsewhere before their Cummington incarnations (the former in the *Kenyon Review* in 1944, the latter in *Partisan Review* in 1947). Each project consequently provides Stevens scholars with very different kinds of evidence, all of it rich. An example might prove instructive here.

In May 1942, Stevens writes to the Cummington Press that he expects to submit the manuscript of *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* within a month. Mindful that Katharine Frazier will need to know the scope of the finished poem to allow her to make the necessary arrangements for its printing, Stevens provides an inventory of the poem's formal characteristics. It will be divided into three sections in order to reflect the properties of the supreme fiction, by which, Stevens mentions, he "of course" means poetry (L 407). The titles of the sections will be: "IT MUST BE ABSTRACT . . . IT MUST CHANGE . . . IT MUST GIVE PLEASURE" (L 406), and these contain thirty poems in groups of ten, none of which will have individual titles. Each poem will be written in the form of a tercet or three-line stanza. On the day in May when this letter was written, Stevens reported that the poem's first two sections were complete and that his attentions were now turning to the writing of the final section. The reader of this frail sheet of paper is filled with pathos, for the hand that marked it is the very hand of the poet suspended in the act of creation. Later, Stevens writes to Frazier personally concerning the line lengths of his nascent poem. He tells her that he uses a loose version of the pentameter line and he offers to rewrite a line or two if the printer's setting needs such accommodation (see L 407).

By contrast, the evidence of the prehistory of *Three Academic Pieces* relates to the publication phase of its embodiment as a Cummington Press edition. Having offered this work for publication, Stevens writes to Harry Duncan on March 28, 1947, explaining that he has received proofs from *Partisan Review* and wishes to make a number of changes to the poem as represented in the proofs. He then rehearses all the changes that he has made to the proofs and urges the Cummington Press to do the same to ensure that the two texts conform. Here we have two unique, but very different kinds of insight into the genetic history of the texts of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" and "Three Academic Pieces."

The themes of which the Rylands papers speak are too myriad, various, and intricate to do justice to here. I shall confine myself to naming three. First, they provide evidence of Stevens' relationship with his publisher, Alfred Knopf, and perhaps provide a gloss on other evidence held elsewhere with regard to this relationship. This particular theme has been previously treated in some depth by Ron Klarén. Second, they provide

astonishing insights into Stevens' practice as a writer and the habits and processes of his composition. In particular, as indicated above, they reveal an intimate account of the textualization of *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*, from its precompositional state through to its compositional and publication phases and its subsequent reception. Third, they act as a testament to Stevens' sensitivity to the importance of the materiality of his texts and of their physical presence in the world. This is especially the case with *Esthétique du Mal*, which was a collaboration with the artist Paul Wightman Williams. The record speaks eloquently of Stevens' clear understanding that the pleasure the poem brings must take account of the body's involvement with the shape, the color, the form, the texture, and the weight of it.

The archive shows him participating at every level in the production of his poems. For example, when he is presented with the possibility of having *Esthétique du Mal* printed in green or purple ink, he is horrified and denounces the use of colored ink as "trivial" and "undignified" (Letter from Wallace Stevens to Harry Duncan, June 11, 1945). The archive reveals how well Stevens knew that the material presence of the codex format affects the reader's apprehension of, and relationship to, the poems it contains. *Avant texte*, he was willing to heed Roger Chartier who reminds us in *On the Edge of the Cliff: History, Language, and Practices* that

forms shape meaning. A text . . . is always inscribed within something material—the written object that bears it, the voice that reads or recites it, the representation that makes it available to the understanding. Each of these forms is organized according to structures of its own that have an essential role in the production of meaning. . . . "Forms effect meaning": against all the purely semantic definitions of texts . . . [we must recall] the symbolic value of signs and of material things. (82)

Different types of archival format survive within the collection that reveal particular kinds of literary and historical evidence. The largest part of the collection is made up of letters that provide a set of correspondence between Stevens and the Cummington Press from December 1941 to January 1951. There are 191 letters, although 192 exchanges take place since Stevens, on one occasion, annotated and returned one of Harry Duncan's letters. Of the 192 exchanges, 85 are from Katharine Frazier and Harry Duncan. One hundred and five letters are from Stevens, which are usually in typescript on Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company letterheaded paper, signed by the poet. A few, however, are in radiantly auratic, angular holograph.

One of the interesting features of this gracious exchange of letters, aside from their content, is that none of the participants knew each other in person. Their relations are entirely enclosed within the letter format, in what Michel de Certeau has defined as a "scriptural economy" (Chartier,

Correspondence 2). Beyond their function within a business transaction, their purpose is ultimately to cement, maintain, and extend the bonds of social life and solidarity within an imagined community of a republic of literature, letters, and art.

These papers also contain the press copy manuscript of *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* in typescript amended in pencil in Stevens' hand. They are the telltale signs of the poem that must change in the act of changing at a particular moment in its prehistory. In a letter, sent separately from the manuscript, to Katharine Frazier on July 20, 1942, Stevens put in a request to make some changes to the text ("Sky-blue" turns to "Night-blue" and "Nancia" becomes the more exotic "Nanzia"). Other changes come later. On August 4, 1942, Stevens writes again with further corrections, stressing that he wants to be sure that Frazier understands the reasoning behind his instructions. He rehearses the changes he wants made and ruminates on the tendency of the ear to err on the side of illiteracy if given a chance. On this occasion, it is the visual presence of his poem on the "deliberate space" of the page that Stevens privileges over the poem's sound.

Spidery splatters of yellow ink stain the manuscript's pages, offering up evidence of the shade that was used for the abstract designs in the subtitle pages of the Cummington edition that separate the "Supreme Fiction" into its abstract, mutable, and pleasure-giving properties. In a letter to Stevens from June 4, 1942, Frazier describes this design as a "symbol of comprehensiveness." In his response, Stevens tells Frazier why the choice of color (light yellow) is significant for him. His taste for "lightness" suggests an almost Plotinian awareness of his poem's potential to combine, in the words of John Bussanich, "the Platonic account of the Good as illuminating power . . . with Aristotelian theories of perception and thought. The cause of thought is the productive intellect, which is compared to light" (52).

The final archival format to be found in the Collection is a fragment of the proof copy for the second section of *Three Academic Pieces*, "Someone Puts a Pineapple Together." This carries a single correction in Stevens' hand. In the accompanying letter to Duncan dated September 22, 1947, Stevens congratulates him on the final proofs, singling out the capital letter "S" for especial praise because it is "swagger"!

Layer by layer, a series of engrossing narratives accumulates in the archive, which sits patiently waiting to be invoked by scholars. As Lucien Febvre remarks, "historical evidence speaks only if properly addressed" (qtd. in Ginzburg 101) and, since the conventions, protocols, and etiquette of "proper address" change through time, there is a real necessity that each generation of Stevens scholars should take seriously its responsibility of returning to the archive. Only around a third of the letters have been published to date, and those that have been published have been plucked out from their context in the archive on account of their striking contents

without thought for a possible coherence to the whole that is greater and more resonant than the sum of the individual parts.

This archive deserves, and always will deserve, further scrutiny. I contend that it is only by working incrementally, in the manner beloved of genetic critics and archaeologists of the Book, through the sequence of records as a whole, letter by letter, forensically sifting the shards of evidence, weighing the clues and pondering the connections between the traces that link manuscript to proof to letter, that we can begin to get a real picture of what this collection can do for Stevens scholarship today. In Carlo Ginzburg's words, "the *hors-texte*, what is outside the text, is also *in* the text, nestling in its folds: we have to discover it, and make it talk" (23).

John Rylands University Library
University of Manchester
England

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Poems

“Anything Is Beautiful If You Say It Is”

Here am I in Suffolk, UK, ripping open the envelope
From Langhorne, USA, enjoying the confluence of chances
that
Booksellers Tom & Rita McCauley live in Pennsylvania,
Not so far from Reading where Wallace Stevens grew up.
I have a whole row of books by him, about him, all the
poetry, the letters,
Bloom and Vendler, *The Necessary Angel*, but not until today
Souvenirs and Prophecies, assembled by his daughter Holly
From the journals of his youth: some of his prolegomena,
Before he slid into his lifelong niche at the Hartford Acci-
dent &
Indemnity Co. of Hartford, Connecticut. Scraps of packing
paper
Fall from the cardboard case, each listing details of
The Hartford's Mutual Funds, April, 2005 . . . What a witty
touch,
What a spirit-lifting wheeze on the part of booksellers
Who have rightly guessed that he who orders Wallace
Stevens
From overseas will appreciate this teasing gesture,
An *amuse-bouche*, as it were, before the feast of Stevens.
Tom McC replies to my grateful e-mail: “*No, we had no idea
Stevens had anything to do with the Hartford—*
My wife just uses bits of junk-mail for packing.”
I try to imagine the dry oceans of paper that must float
around
The State of Pennsylvania for this to be merely coincidence.
They’re souvenirs of what hasn’t yet happened, prophecies
From the past, beautiful in all their desperate crumpled
dullness,
Like his window’s lemon light and the dirt along his sill.

Rodney Pybus
Sudbury, England

Anecdote of the Ban

The Alabama State Textbook Commission, in response to public outcry, agreed that certain anthologies be removed from the schools because the books included authors who were "too bitter," "bizarre," and "poor writers," one example being Wallace Stevens.

We raised a ban in Alabam'
and brought it down upon the skull
of a sloven, bitter bard
we chose to quell.

The readers kept their big mouths shut
and sprawled around, no longer wild.
The poet lay there on the ground
bizarre and portly, gasping for air.

We took dominion everywhere.
Though we be gray and bare,
we do not give of prose or verse
like nothing else in Alabam'.

Richard Frost
Otego, N.Y.

Dew Point

Now life has seen me out
even to gobswipe and guttershite

as the details interrupted the way
ideas abandoned themselves

the way I cannot change my pulse
as I stutter cooling to my dew point

rising higher or jelling my ideas
about words made up spittleshot

with drips, drabs, dribbles, drabbles
the way each generation harvests

its/my vocabularies erasing futures
their custody averted with crave/leap.

Edward Mycue
San Francisco, Calif.

Opera Season in Tashkent

The ursine Uzbek usherette
urges us to desist imbibing
slivovitz before ushering us
to our tier in the plush loge.
Her uvarovite signet ring
glows emerald-green,
boutinière incarnadined.
Uxorious as always, I guide
my wife, who's come unglued
by Neptune's seven moons,
toward our annual mating
of nates and seats beneath
the chandeliers, in time for
Boris Godunov's opening bars.

Roy Jacobstein
Chapel Hill, N.C.

Gargle Frog

At three A.M. I leave myself
little penciled Post-it notes,
scribbled snippets of phrase,
a word or two, a line perhaps,
to spur my next day's search
for light beyond the copse—
anemic gambit: when I wake
I find those intended bearings
misbegotten seed, a cryptic fen,
a bewildering bog of *stuff*
ruffed grouse & mailbox moose,
Aztec tutu, albino rhino, gargle frog.

Roy Jacobstein,
Chapel Hill, N.C.

Dusk over Hartford

The sea surface of clouds paraphrases the moon
while a postcard in an abandoned store
reads, *Farewell to Florida*,

the men here are falling.

They had no way of knowing
ghosts would someday address

the United Dames: "Adieu, adieu!"

Beneath a hotel ceiling fan, a widow stirs
a tall drink; the American sublime

plays sad strains of a gay waltz. After all,
life is anecdote, windows dimming
with dense violet light. In its tint,

her mind proclaims fear the emperor,
its flapping shadow large above her.
A bird with coppery,

keen claws, it inscribes
poetry's destructive force onto the mahogany
table where the woman rests

her glass, its mark a nimbus.
The narcotic sun lights
six significant landscapes

outside the window.
Outside the widow's
mind, a man approaches.

She rasps, "Peer through my monocle
and you'll agree that a good man has no shape,
but is two versions of the same poem."

Dean Kostos
New York, N.Y.

Februar

*An accent in some hazy thing,
in a perfect harmony of a number of grays,
a sound . . . Vuillard said of Corot,
which is wonderful by me as I survey
parts of a fine gray world from the highest floor
of the Baltimore hotel. There's a metaphor
for this: nebulous brilliancies in the smallest look
of the being's deepest darling,*

which is Stevens at his rococoest best,
which I love, in the modus rhododendron
of my brimming heart. But back to Vuillard, to whom
a picture is a series of harmonies, a red geranium,
say, rhymed with a gold chrysanthemum in the same
gilded frame.

Beauty and repose in a texture rounded
by Pleasure, who is, after all, the child of Eros
and Psyche. We who set our scenes in the midst

of dreams are gathered here in Baltimore.
Harmonies. *Harmonium*. Harbor.
Snow-full skies and radiant margins below them.
The ends of vision and desire are the same.
From the transparencies of summer to the wood
of winter, in the rotunda under broad
gray light, I can see the humming of the many lines
anchored to this ripe and breathing shore.

Sidney Wade
Gainesville, Fla.

Reviews

The Contemplated Spouse: The Letters of Wallace Stevens to Elsie.

By Wallace Stevens. Edited by J. Donald Blount. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006.

Many scholars working in the Wallace Stevens archive at the Huntington Library at San Marino, Calif., have been aware of the large number of letters written by him to his future wife that were *not* included in the *Letters* edited by his daughter forty years ago. J. Donald Blount has now edited that complete collection of 272 letters under the title *The Contemplated Spouse: The Letters of Wallace Stevens to Elsie*, including the 180 letters that, until now, “have been published only fractionally or not at all” (xii). Most of the letters were written in 1908 and 1909, the marriage to Elsie Kachel occurring in September of the latter year. Blount provides relevant biographical information interspersed throughout his groupings of the letters and helpfully identifies in footnotes obscure names, places, and other data mentioned by Stevens in passing. Students of the poetry now have access to what is perhaps the last significant unpublished materials written by this major American poet of the first half of the twentieth century.

It is noteworthy that only one side of the correspondence (with very few exceptions) survives. Many of Stevens’ letters to his future wife (Blount believes “the number had to be in the hundreds” [28]) were destroyed by Elsie after the poet’s death—just as she also excised pages from his journals. Short and selected excerpts from some of the destroyed letters were copied out by Elsie in a stenographer’s notebook and are reproduced in full by Blount. Editing Stevens’ difficult handwriting for publication is always a formidable challenge. On page 10 of Elsie’s notebook, both Blount and Holly Stevens reproduce one item in this way: “We have turned a whole Country into a home and had sunsets for hearths and evening stars for lamps” (Blount 34; *Letters* 85). Based on my examination of the notebook at the Huntington, the word “Country” should be “County.” (*Letters* also fails to capitalize the word “Count[r]y.”) In Stevens’ letter to Elsie dated July 20, 1909, Blount accurately corrects *Letters* by adding the conjunction “But”: “I could see that too. But . . .” (Blount 245; *Letters* 149).

Seven years younger than Stevens, Elsie had just turned eighteen at the time that she and Wallace were introduced in Reading, Pa., in 1904. Her father (Howard Kachel) had married her mother (née Ida Bright Smith) a few months after her conception, and Elsie’s daughter, Holly Stevens, believes that “there were apparently a good many questions (and some aspersions cast) about my mother’s legitimacy” (*SP* 137). Perhaps because of this Holly believes her mother “suffered from a persecution complex” (*SP* 137) throughout her adult life. In any case, her father died a few months following her birth, and her mother remarried when Elsie was eight. Although she was never formally adopted by her stepfather, Lehman Moll, she used his surname rather than

Kachel. Somewhat mysteriously, Elsie's formal education never went beyond the eighth grade; she left high school in her first year, according to Holly, "owing to financial pressures on the family and, as she told me, because her eyes were so bad she couldn't see the blackboard" (*SP* 138). The explanation seems incomplete, but Elsie managed to prepare herself to become a stenographer and an accomplished pianist; before her marriage she worked as a salesperson and milliner. When the Stevenses were living in Hartford, Elsie performed a piano solo (MacDowell's "Andante," *Third Sonata*, Opus 57) for the Hartford Musical Club and, on another occasion, presented remarks to the same group on "A Sketch of the New Italian Composers and Their Works" (6).

There is little doubt that the fifty-one year history of the relationship between Wallace and Elsie underwent many metamorphoses, but the interviews conducted by Peter Brazeau with persons who saw glimpses into their lives in Hartford over the years found the marriage chilled, their relationship distant and at times hostile. Elsie became something of a recluse with little apparent interest in Stevens' poetry and occasionally disparaging of it. Even during these early years, Stevens occasionally assumes the role of preceptor, however playfully, a role that later grew irksome to its recipient: "It has always been a particular desire of mine to have you join [the] church" (68); "Live your own life, and try to perfect it" (180). As Blount points out, "he controlled every aspect of their marriage [wedding plans]" (99). It is little wonder that Stevens would respond to Elsie's apparent complaint with "It is painful to me to think that you fear I am criticizing you" (39).

All this said, one will ask what the letters of his courtship reveal about the future modernist poet. They offer little in the way of intellectual discourse—only passing references, for example, to art exhibits or musical concerts he has attended in New York where he was living and working. Stevens composed for his fiancée's birthdays unpublished collections of short lyrics, one called "Book of Verses" in 1908 and one called "The Little June Book" the following year: all forty poems are easily classified as slight. There is little discussion about the actual writing of poetry (such as would appear in later letters) because most of these letters antedate Stevens' birth as a modernist. When he plays poet here it is as a clowning and whimsical Pierrot to Elsie's more dainty and judgmental Columbine. Stevens, in fact, delights in role-playing throughout the letters, and their content discloses the most spontaneous and unguarded Wallace Stevens that we have from any source.

In one letter (that is not included in the earlier edition of *Letters*) Stevens reveals a trait that would, in fact, account for the style of many of his later poems: "I wish I could write as fast as I think, but often while I am writing one thing my mind darts to another, and the queerest jumble results" (172). Many years later, Stevens the poet would learn to shape that "queerest jumble" into some of his most effective specimens: he would later identify his poetry as part of "the rapidity of thought" (*L* 319). A few months earlier, Stevens mailed to Elsie the following hastily scrawled lines:

Rig-a-jig-jig
And a jig-jig-jig—

Apple blossoms
Moon-light on roofs,
Fairy-tales,
Bon-fires,
Three-volume novels,
Poplar trees
Lanterns on dark roads. (111)

"I defy you to think of anything more pleasant than a lantern twinkling toward you along a dark road" (111). Here is Stevens reaching toward an Imagist technique, a spontaneous association of items of personal predilection serving no other function than to "Rig-a-jig-jig" for the sheer pleasure of sound and rhythm. What letters such as these demonstrate is how, embedded in Stevens' own jocund personality, such poems as "Depression Before Spring," "Life Is Motion," and "Bantams in Pine-Woods" would come about.

In several letters, Stevens displays his own delight in his private and imagined worlds to which he was inviting his soon-to-be wife. One can only wonder if Elsie herself found such indulgences flighty and even unsettling or if they loomed as the prospect of a magical kingdom that the father she never had was about to provide for her: "And can't you possibly close your eyes and, by imagination, feel that it is perfectly real—the dark circle of poplars, with the round moon among them, the air moving, the water falling, and that sweet outpouring of liquid sound—fountains and nightingales. . . . If only it were possible to escape from what the dreadful Galsworthy calls Facts" (245–46). To a certain extent, Elsie herself became a figure of his imagination, a phenomenon that obviously troubled her as she had made him aware: "It is very hard to lose you this time, harder than ever before, because we both feel that we are becoming 'all letters,' as you said" (79).

Partly because of their separation during the five years before their marriage but mostly because of Stevens' own temperament, the poet frequently invents a closed world consisting only of himself and his fiancée: "Do you know what I would do, if the world were made of wishes? I'd lock you up—in a large enough place, to be sure; a whole valley as big as a country, maybe—and I'd allow only the most unexceptionable people to come there" (46). One wonders how Elsie, as his future wife, responded to this letter from 1907 describing a vigorous hike he had just completed: "The sheets of mist, the trees swallowed up at a little distance in mist, the driving cold wind, the noisy solitude, the clumps of ice and patches of snow—the little wilderness all my own, shared with nobody, not even with you—it made me myself" (75–76). Where, one might ask, was there room for Elsie? And, because Stevens is here anticipating the exclusionary world that would come to exist in the poems themselves, cannot one also anticipate her later resistance to such rival *amours*?

The socially narrow world of Wallace and Elsie during their courtship led to an irritation on the part of Stevens' parents and siblings back in Reading. The absence of the Stevens family from the wedding has long been noted: a rupture had occurred, apparently because of their disapproval of Elsie's social class and their second son's own neglect of them during his visits. It is

strange that there is no direct mention of this alienation in the correspondence; there is, in fact, no mention of Stevens' individual family members at all. On one occasion, Elsie had apparently complained that his visits to Reading were not more frequent. Stevens replies that "there is really no good excuse," but then corrects himself: "And yet there is one. Surely, I need not humiliate myself by going into it." He adds, "I am very much of a stranger in Reading. It has grown to be like going to a strange place. . . . Sometimes, even, I resent the familiarity of those I once knew well enough" (110–11). At the end of 1908, he is staying in boardinghouses while in the town.

Other letters to Elsie disclose some of Stevens' complex attitudes toward religion, at a time when he was struggling as a skeptic to determine what his relationship with institutional churches would be. The natural world in all its seasons, to which Stevens regularly escaped from the city by way of his renowned and ambitious hikes, is a subject of constant description, a world that is unmistakably the landscape of many future poems.

Whether poetry should serve the purposes of beauty for its own sake or for "the service to something"—an issue that troubled him throughout his life—is also briefly touched on here. In all, the letters reveal what Blount calls Stevens' "basic personality as a teacher, a preacher, a prophet, a rabbi, a philosopher, and a poet, all of which were synonymous terms for him" (100).

Blount's edition of the letters fills a large gap in our knowledge of one part of Stevens' life and personality: we see the inchoate poet in gestation just before the emergence of his mature work. In a wider view, however, the publication of these letters also brings home the larger need for a new edition of the "collected" letters, many of which have been found and published promiscuously since the Knopf edition appeared in 1966. (What one would do with the massive but perfunctory business and genealogical correspondence is another matter.) Blount makes the claim, "Without Elsie, the poetry of Wallace Stevens as we have it would have never been written. She was his genius." I think this overstates the influence, though Blount adds somewhat enigmatically, "She was his poetic oxygen, absolutely necessary in the right amount and absolutely deadly in excessive doses" (25). In truth, she became unnecessary to the poet even by the time he came to write many of the *Harmonium* poems, and Blount acknowledges as much when he later states, "Stevens's mature poetry seems to be a product of that [marital] discord as much as any direct inspiration by Elsie as a mythical muse" (100). In fact, a large number of the poems became efforts to find in the world itself a substitute-lover and thus a cure for the encompassing alienations of his life: "It was in the earth only / That he was at the bottom of things / And of himself" (*CPP* 216). Blount shrewdly states at the end of his book that Elsie's many years with Stevens, going beyond the years of courtship and early marriage, became "an essential revelation of the character of the man whose poems so openly and so obliquely reveal him" (424). It is for the poems themselves and the poet behind them—revealed both "so openly and so obliquely"—that our attention to the richness of these letters is repaid.

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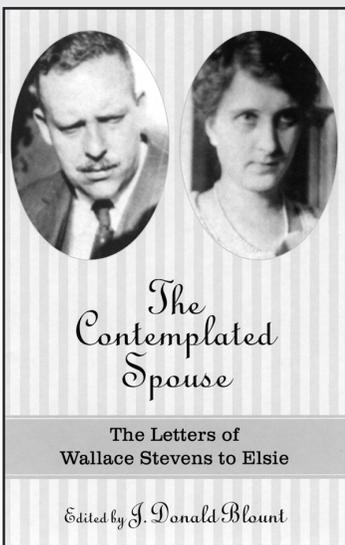
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THE CONTEMPLATED SPOUSE

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.

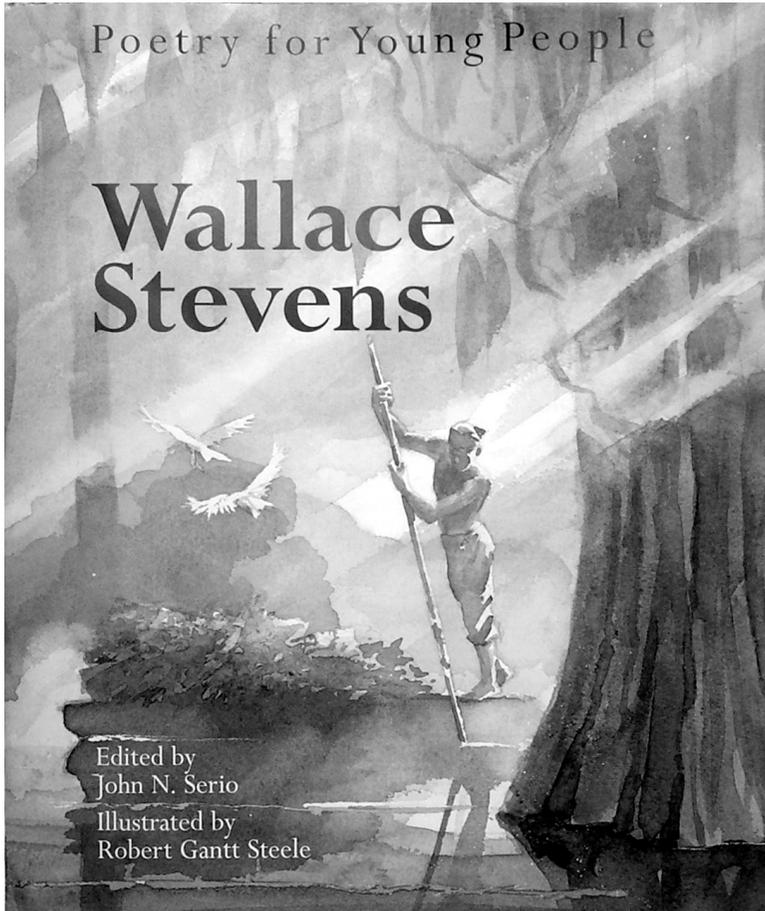
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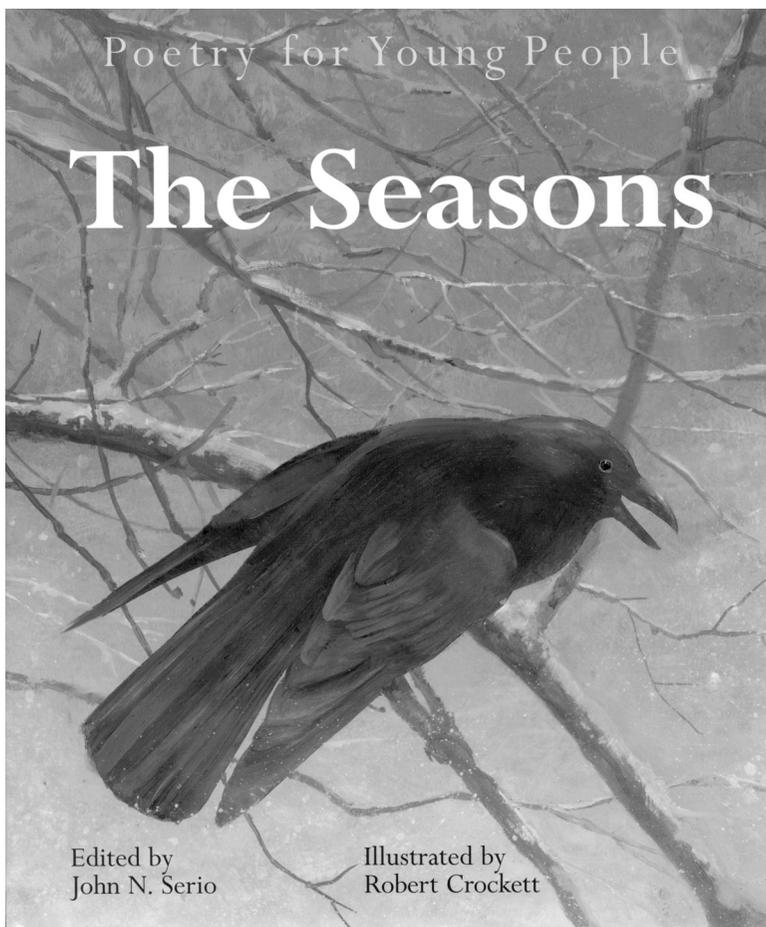
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