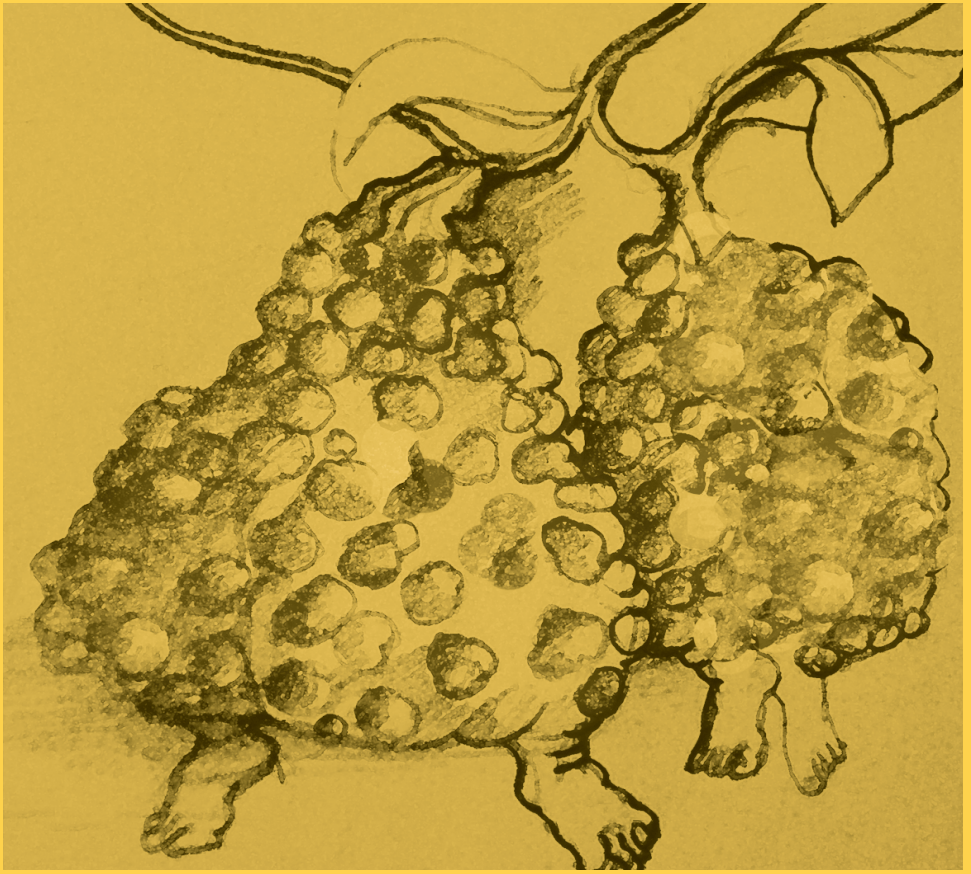


*The
Wallace
Stevens
Journal*



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Kathryn Jacobi

from "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle"

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Ivan S. Daugherty's "Memorandum" on Wallace Stevens

JAMES M. DAUGHERTY

MY GRANDFATHER, Ivan Simpson Daugherty (known as "Doc," since our name is pronounced "Dokkerty"), worked directly under Wallace Stevens as a lawyer in the Hartford Insurance Company from approximately 1929 on. Their association was close and Ivan saw him daily. They often ate lunch and drank martinis together on Wednesdays at Stevens' favorite spot, the Canoe Club, and Ivan received inscribed copies of Stevens' books following their publication. Yet, when I tell people about their association, I am left with a couple of problems. The first is that nobody in my usual circles has read or even heard of Wallace Stevens. The second is that all my family's stories represent Stevens as a son of a bitch, or, if that is too strong, then at least as "a very small man." In fact, I remember my aunt Barbara, Ivan's daughter, describing Stevens using that very phrase. Because I was young, she had to explain to me that it was not a reference to his physical size.

Because of the lasting bitterness Ivan and our family had toward Stevens, neither my grandmother, Mrs. Mary C. Daugherty, nor my father, Ivan S. Daugherty, Jr., agreed to speak with Peter Brazeau when he was compiling his oral biography. However, my mother, Lillian, who had met Stevens while dating my father (whom Stevens called "the boy" in the interview), agreed, and her interview, one of the most negative characterizations of Stevens, is contained in Brazeau's book. In an odd coincidence, my mother had also met Holly Stevens while they were both students at the now-defunct University of Connecticut's Hartford branch in downtown Hartford. Holly was older by perhaps six years, already divorced and living at home. One evening Holly invited a group of about six friends, including my mother, back to Stevens' home. The noise from the group awakened Stevens, who, according to my mother, quietly but sternly summoned Holly to the upper landing of the stairway. Holly returned embarrassed and annoyed and told the group that they would have to leave. What struck my mother as odd, what she remembered, was that Stevens had appeared in a Scrooge-like nightshirt and stocking cap.

After my grandfather died at age 73 in 1970, my grandmother did not want any of the Stevens material in her home, including the inscribed books, and so she had my father pass them along to a bookseller friend of

his, John F. Hendsey. Perhaps waiting for them to increase in value, Hendsey held onto this material for nearly a decade before conducting an auction of this and other Stevens material on April 28, 1982 (see the Appendix at the end of this article for this and other related material). I do not know how much of the material from my grandfather was sold at that time, but I have included a list of those items mentioned in Hendsey's catalogue that describe works inscribed by Stevens to my grandfather.

I have included photocopies, taken from the catalogue, of two of the books Stevens inscribed to my grandfather, for one in particular, *Ideas of Order*, illustrates that even in giving a present to my grandfather, Stevens could not resist a dig: "To Ivan Daugherty / of all people / his friend / Wallace Stevens." My mother told me that in later years Ivan would often show that book's inscription to guests with amusement. I think he looked back upon the years with Stevens with just a little less bitterness than my grandmother Mary did, who felt that Stevens had held my grandfather back from promotion within the company.

Not long ago my mother unearthed a photograph copy of my grandfather's "Memorandum" (printed below), along with a receipt from John Hendsey, dated October 27, 1994, detailing the sale of more Stevens material, including the "Memorandum" and a signed copy of "Description Without Place." Neither my mother, endearingly called "Nick" by Hendsey in the receipt, nor I can say whether that book belonged to my grandfather or to my father, who had by then himself become an antique bookseller and had perhaps found a signed copy of Stevens' work elsewhere. The "Memorandum" tells of the frustration my grandfather felt at the hands of Stevens, particularly in an era when one's career was tied to a long tenure with just one company. I am happy its contents can be revealed here, as it is both an additional insight into Stevens and a tribute to my grandfather's struggle with him.

Memorandum

Knowing, from eighteen years of association, how vindictive and cruel Mr. Stevens has been to all those who have had the audacity to oppose him or express opinions or views contrary to his, it seems necessary to make a memorandum of an episode which occurred on Friday January 3, 1947. I do this in order that there may be a record, made at the time of the occurrence and while the matter is fresh in my recollection, should there be any distortion of the facts by Mr. Stevens at perhaps some remote date in any retaliation by him against me.

It first seems necessary to indulge in some self analysis and to review some past events in order that the mood I was in on January 3, 1947 may be understood. I think I am only normally ambitious. I have looked for success only through my superior Mr. Stevens, it not being in my nature to seek success through other quarters. I have made progress in my eighteen years with the company, but it has been slow with long waiting periods between salary increases. There was never much joy in receiving increases because of the ungracious manner in which Mr. Stevens granted them. They were usually accompanied with expressions of doubt that I was entitled to them and statements to the effect that it would be a long time before I got another. While I have no complaint concerning my present salary, having received a salary increase in 1946, I nevertheless feel that by comparable standards with promotions generally during the past few years, I have not achieved the success which my accomplishments have warranted. This is not to say that I have any grievance with the company or that I am envious of any of the men here who in recent years have been recognized by promotion. That I should resent Mr. Stevens' failure to allow me in that company I consider perfectly normal. At the same time Mr. Stevens is my superior and he has the responsibility of determining the extent to which I should progress with the company, and I do not dispute his right to make that decision. However, I again think it no more than normal that I should resent an adverse decision, because I am confident that my record does not justify such a conclusion. From statements made by Mr. Stevens, I gather that he has never made any decision about me and has no intention of doing so. He apparently long since decided that my future was not to be decided by him, but, if at all, by others.

One year ago, after the lapse of six years since the last increase, Mr. Stevens ungraciously stated that he supposed that I thought I was entitled to a raise. I stated that I certainly did. I further stated that if I was finished so far as further progress was concerned and I was not to share in the good things that the company had to offer

men of my qualifications, I would appreciate greatly being so informed. He stated that he had never said that I was finished. This was a correct statement, which however evaded the question since it did not reveal whether so far as he was concerned I actually was finished. He stated that he would see what could be done, and a few days later advised that I was to receive a 10% increase. He made no statement of any future plans for me. On January 3, 1947, as a result of the episode on that date, he stated first that he would never go to lunch with me again and further that so far as he was concerned he would never do a single thing for me. It can now be said that my continuance with the company is on my own responsibility.

It is necessary to relate something about the Wohlwend case in Akron, Ohio. This was a claim of \$241,000 on public official bonds, on which I collected more than \$100,000 in salvage; collected \$28,500 from other sureties, although the liability of these companies was far from clear; and effected a saving on the claimed loss of \$51,000, a total saving to the company of approximately \$175,000, without including interest, which if enforced would have amounted to an additional \$45,000.

Mr. Stevens has never been profuse in his praise of work well done. I agree that we are all paid to do a good job and I do not think one is necessarily entitled to special rewards in any case. However one does not expect an employer to make a studied effort to minimize good work, as Mr. Stevens very obviously has done in this case. When I returned from my first trip to Akron and announced the collection of assets worth \$107,000, he raised his eye brows and offered no comment. He studiously avoided any comment concerning the case for about six months. Mr. Heard, who was in my office, remarked to Mr. Stevens that I had done a good job on the case. Mr. Stevens replied "Yes, it was a good job, but it doesn't mean anything." Later when I reported developments in the case to Mr. Stevens, he took obvious pleasure in telling me that one time he collected \$100,000 on a case for Mr. Bissell, as a result of which Mr. Bissell had given him a salary increase of \$1500. My only comment was that nothing like that had ever happened to me. I frequently advised Mr. Stevens of developments in the case, which had never left my desk since its inception, because I felt it my duty to keep him informed. His attitude was always one of indifference. When I informed him on January 2 that settlement had been agreed upon, he rudely stopped me in the middle of my statement. He did show some interest in whether there was to be a judgement. When Mr. Mullen and I stopped at Mr. Stevens' office at noon on January 3, 1947, to proceed to the Canoe Club for lunch, I stated to Mr. Stevens what Mr. Sellers had said about the judgement. Mr. Stevens remarked sarcastically to Ralph that it would be nice to hear the last of the Wohlwend case. I was furious, and in

this mood I went to lunch with Mr. Mullen and Mr. Stevens at the Canoe Club, where with the aid of two martinis, which we all had, I got all of my feelings about Mr. Stevens' attitude toward me off my chest.

To be frank I cannot say what started me on this venture when we arrived at the club. When I made a remark, Mr. Stevens' response prompted another remark, and the first thing we knew we were battling the ball back and forth with Mr. Mullen trying his best to get the conversation in other channels. These are some of the things that I said.

I stated that Mr. Stevens had always minimized my efforts with the company; that with other men who had come into the department and moved on to bigger things he had made a point of seeing to it that their works were made known to the powers that be; that Mr. Sigmans was only in the department one week when he was sent on a special mission for the president, an opportunity which it would not occur to him to allow me.

I stated that I had replaced Jim Powers, who was a completely inexperienced claim man and who was paid \$6500, and that Mr. Stevens had made me work 15 years (I should have said 13 years) before I gained that salary, and that it took a blanket raise of 10% early in the war for me to get it then.

I said that I had heard unstinted praise of other men for winning judgements in lower courts in cases where the final judgement went against us and we were required to pay the full amount involved plus substantial interest and attorney fees.

I particularly resented Mr. Stevens' studied minimizing of the Wohlwend case. A claim man only has a few opportunities in a lifetime to do as good a job. I called his attention to the fact that he himself had told me that when something was said to Mr. Rutherford about me he had had a notion to tell him about my accomplishments in the Wohlwend case, but he did not do so because he thought that Mr. Rutherford might ask some questions about the case which he, Mr. Stevens, would be unable to answer.

Mr. Stevens stated to me that he had nothing whatever to do with promotions; that those things were decided by others. I promptly told him that it was his executive duty to have something to do with promotions, at least of his own men.

I stated that, prior to his being elevated to a vice-presidency, he had been interested in his department and men but that after his elevation it appeared that he had all he wanted and apparently assumed no responsibility for his people.

Returning to the office, Mr. Stevens stated that he would never go to lunch with me again and that he would not do another thing for me. We were stopped in traffic at the R.R. Station at the time of this

remark, after which he threw open the door of the car and walked away in a huff.

Later in the day, I went into Mr. Stevens' office and stated that I was sorry about the whole thing. I stated that in my present situation my salary bore a proper relation to that of Mr. Mullen. I confessed that in my fury, and perhaps aided by the cocktails, my innermost thoughts had come out. I did not retract those thoughts and I do not do so now. Mr. Stevens stated that, if the foregoing was all that I had to say, that was all there was to it. It was obvious that the foregoing statement was not satisfactory to him. However it was the best statement that I could make, feeling as I do about Mr. Stevens' indifference to my welfare and future.

I at no time during our controversy made any demands whatsoever either for a salary increase or promotion. Having been provoked into my angry mood, I had embarked on this venture with the determination to find out, if possible, once and for all where I stood with Mr. Stevens. I of course now realize that I should have had sense enough to know, from the infrequent increases granted and the ungracious manner in which they were given, that I could look for nothing from Mr. Stevens but the barest crumbs of recognition. I explain this stupidity on my part only by saying that I have had supreme confidence in the quality of my work and believed that, under the announced policy of the company, I was bound sooner or later to gain recognition. It now appears that the general policy of the company, with respect to encouragement and promotion of worthy men, does not apply to Mr. Stevens' department, except as the other officers of the company may be able to discern the qualities of men in that department and do something about such men. This is not a criticism of the company, which I regard as the best in the business and with which I have no grievance.

At one point in our conversation, Mr. Stevens stated that he had never blocked me. That I can believe. However, I must also believe that he has never raised his voice for me and never had any intention of doing so, so far as promotion is concerned. My observation is that he, years ago, wiped his hands of responsibility for me except for very infrequent, ungracious, nominal increases. He has frequently stated that nothing makes him more furious than to have anyone working for him ask for a raise. Some years ago I asked him when I was to have Jim Powers' job and salary. Mr. Stevens' reaction was such a humiliating experience that I then determined that I would never ask him again for consideration of any sort, and I never have done so. Mr. Stevens has been known to dismiss or transfer minor employees from the department simply because those employees thought that they were entitled to a raise. His attitude is that anyone who expects more than he has received is an ingrate.

Mr. Stevens has on a number of occasions in the last few years stated that he did not think that he would ever again do anything for anyone. I did not ask why, because I knew why he had made the statement. I think that I have suffered somewhat from the foregoing state of mind, and that is what I have referred to when I said to Mr. Stevens that I felt that I had been discriminated against.

After this episode, my greatest concern was that what I had said must have sounded envious of those who have had more good fortune. I do not envy those who have been rewarded by promotion for the part that they have played in contributing to the success of their department heads. On January 4, I therefore went into Mr. Stevens' office, thinking that I could provoke some conversation out of which we could be friends, with whatever limitations either of us might place on our future friendship. I stated that since our controversy I had the feeling that I was being followed and that I thought it was the shades of Judge Loomis, who was one of the most disgruntled men in our company. Mr. Stevens again dismissed this overture on my part to make amends, to the extent that it is possible under the circumstances.

Mr. Stevens has not been an easy man to work for. He has a great contempt for his fellow men. He has always felt free to make any remark that occurs to him, no matter how insulting or what the effect on a man's pride. One must always take whatever he says as though it were a joke and grin like an imbecile. If one talks back, he runs the risk of his lasting dislike and enmity. On the other hand, I have gotten along with Mr. Stevens uncommonly well. He is a brilliant man and has many fine qualities which have drawn me to him. I feel that my outburst, if it can be considered as such, was provoked by him. We both became very angry, and, this being so, perhaps neither should be held too closely to what was said by each. I regard the encounter as purely personal. If any attempt is made to drive me out of the company, I have no fear that I will be denied a hearing, because I know that my company deals fairly in all things. If the breach between Mr. Stevens and me is to be permanent, my name can merely be added to the long list of those who before me have had similar experiences.

January 10, 1947

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Ivan S. Daugherty". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned to the right of the date.

Appendix

1. Hendsey Auction of Stevens Material, April 28, 1982.

AUCTION SALE NUMBER 5

WALLACE STEVENS A MAJOR COLLECTION FIRST EDITIONS

including

The first printed copy of IDEAS of ORDER
and the ALCESTIS PRESS presentation issue
of OWL'S CLOVER, one of twenty copies

and

RARE AMERICANA, ATLASES & MAPS of the 16th, 17th and 18th Century

including

JEFFREYS' AMERICAN ATLAS, 1776, ORTELIUS' TYPUS
ORBIS TERRARUM [c1575] AND TARLETON'S HISTORY
of the Campaigns of 1780 and 1781

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 28, 1982 at 6:30 P.M.

at the

*HOWARD JOHNSON CONFERENCE CENTER,
Windsor Locks, Conn.*

(Three miles from Bradley International Airport)

EXIT 41 (Center Street) off Route 91, twelve miles North of Hartford, CT

Exhibition opens at 10:00 A.M. DAY OF SALE



We will execute absentee bids without charge under the terms and conditions of sale outlined in this catalogue.

2. List of numbered items in Hendsey catalogue containing works inscribed by Wallace Stevens to Ivan S. Daugherty.

9 STEVENS, WALLACE. *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*. New York, 1954

Thick 8vo. Maroon cloth, dust jacket, fine condition.

First edition, numbered copy of 2500, presentation copy, inscribed to Ivan Daugherty, the inscription reads, "To Doc/Wallace Stevens/Oct. 4, 1954". Daugherty worked with Stevens for many years in Hartford. Edelstein A23a1. [1500/1750]

21 STEVENS, WALLACE. *Ideas of Order*. New York, 1936

8vo. Colored striped cloth, dust jacket, fine condition.

First trade edition, first binding. Presentation copy, inscribed: "To Ioan Daugherty/of all people/his friend/Wallace Stevens." Daugherty worked with Stevens for many years in Hartford. Edelstein, A2b. [1250/1500]

27 STEVENS, WALLACE. *The Man with the Blue Guitar & Other Poems*. New York, 1937

8vo. Yellow cloth, dust jacket, fine condition.

First edition. Second printing of the dust jacket. Inscribed "Ivan Daugherty/for thee my friend/Wallace Stevens. x •8• 1937." Edelstein A4a. [1250/1500]

32 STEVENS, WALLACE. *The Necessary Angel*. New York, 1951

8vo. Green cloth, dust jacket, about fine.

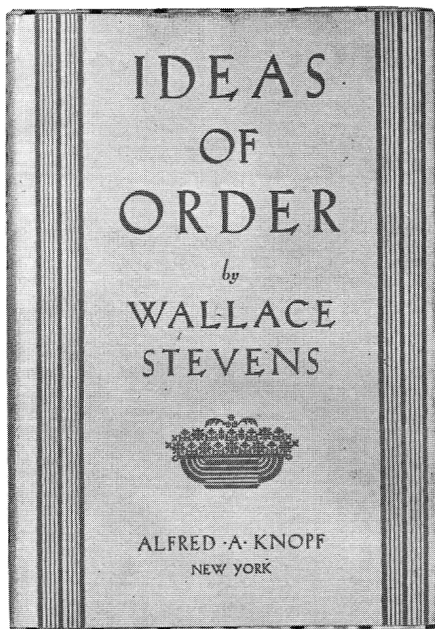
First edition, presentation copy, inscribed; "For my old friend and/associate Ivan Daugherty,/that is to say Doc/Wallace Stevens." Edelstein A17a1. [1250/1500]

38 STEVENS, WALLACE. *Owl's Clover*. New York, The Alcestis Press, [1936]

Large 8vo, orange printed wrappers, fine condition.

Presentation issue, numbered (in roman numerals) copy of 20 on Didot hand-made paper, signed by the author. This copy, (XIV) was presented by Stevens to Ivan Daugherty. [6000/8000]

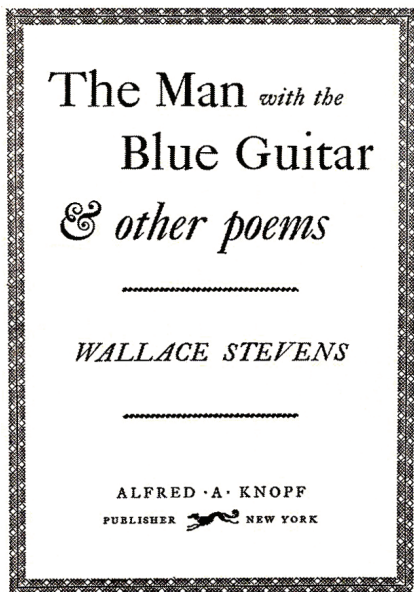
3. From Hendsey catalogue, showing inscription,
 "To Ivan Daugherty/of all people from/his friend/Wallace Stevens."



IDEAS OF ORDER

To Ivan Daugherty
 of all people from
 his friend
 Wallace Stevens

4. From Hendsey catalogue, showing inscription,
 "Ivan Daugherty/For thee my friend/Wallace Stevens/x.8.1937."



Ivan Daugherty

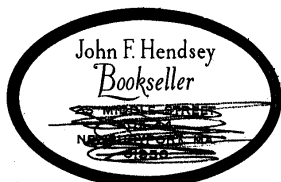
The Man With The Blue Guitar
 & other poems

For the my friend

Wallace Stevens

X. 8. 1937.

5. Receipt from Hendsey to Lillian Daugherty ("Nick"), showing sale of "Memorandum" on October 27, 1994.



Box 437, RUMNEY NH 03266
10-27-94

DEAR NICK

Here is the accounting thus far

1.	BIBLIOGRAPHY of American Literature	\$ 650.00
2.	STEVENS	
	1. Description without place (signed)	1200.00
	2. Other material inc TRINITY Rev (signed)	
	Books from HIS LIBRARY one annotated	
	"Memorandum" by Ivan Daugherty +	400.00
	other pamphlets	500.00
3	Four chapbooks (2" x 3" approx)	160.00
4	Four American Colonization Society pamphlets	
		<hr/>
		2910.00
		30.00
		<hr/>
		\$ 2860.00

→ "Expenses"
includes a couple of beers

Hope to see you + family one of these days.

John

Wallace Stevens' Marvellian Intertext: "The Garden" and "Description Without Place"

GENEVIEVE GUENTHER

[H]owever one time may differ from another, there are always available to us the faculties of the past, but always vitally new and strong, as the sources of perfection today and tomorrow.

—Stevens, "Two or Three Ideas"

CRITICS HAVE RECENTLY noticed that Stevens alludes to the English Renaissance in "Description Without Place." Positing that Stevens was influenced by E. M. W. Tillyard's *The Elizabethan World Picture*, Arnd Bohm has proposed that Stevens modeled his "green queen"¹ after Queen Elizabeth I, who in Tillyard's account acted, like Stevens' queen, as a kind of *primum mobile* organizing the thoughts and experiences of her subjects. Edward Ragg has heard resonances of *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the poem's opening section, a series of intertextual echoes that, for Ragg, attempt to produce "a realm of experience *beyond* the political sphere" (100). Although it seems to me that the argument about the relationship among mind, language, and world that Stevens represents in "Description Without Place" ultimately has political valence, it is true that Stevens elaborates that argument by retreating from history into a poetic invocation of philosophical contemplation. My aim in this essay is to propose another early modern intertext that enabled such a retreat: Andrew Marvell's metaphysical poem "The Garden." Marvell's lyric promises that the mind may withdraw from the social world and "Annihilat[e] all that's made / To a green thought in a green shade" (109), and its promise supplies, I will argue, not only the imagery re-embodied in "Description Without Place," but also a model of the thinking subject engaged with external objects that structures the ideational form of Stevens' poem.

Stevens seems to have had a lifelong interest in Marvell. The trope of the "green mind" first emerges in "Banal Sojourn," published in 1923, and it appears again not only in other poems of the 1940s, but also in "The Sail of Ulysses," which Stevens delivered as the Phi Beta Kappa poem at Columbia University in May 1954. In "Description Without Place," Stevens

turns to Marvell's garden not as a historical or topographical place (not as the garden in "Upon Appleton House," that is), but as an allegory of the subject in the solitary contemplation that enables the consciousness of a dialectic between mind and world. In this dialectic, thought projects the perception of objects out into the world while simultaneously absorbing those objects into the imagination. This is not quite the identity of thought and experience for which T. S. Eliot praised the metaphysical poets so highly;² as it is enacted in Stevens' poem, the dialectic is more argumentative than sensuous. Indeed, Stevens seemed to be working with a post-Eliot understanding of metaphysical poetry, which was most concerned with the argumentative thrust of metaphysical poems as wholes.

Beginning in the late 1930s, and continuing into the next decade, metaphysical poetry was most influentially defined as having an overall tropological structure in which commonsense distinctions between things are undermined in order to reveal startling analogies between disparate phenomena. Tropes that reveal these analogies were, and still are, called "metaphysical conceits." (Samuel Johnson called such conceits "heterogeneous ideas . . . yoked by violence together" [1.21].) Rosemond Tuve, whose monumental *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery* stands as the most important book on metaphysical poetry written in the 1940s, explains that metaphysical conceits are not suitable to clear visualizing of object, act, place, or person, but rather function aesthetically to make the reader "apprehend abstractions as if they were . . . concretions" (219). Metaphysical conceits register not visually but abstractly, in part because they are metaphors that are extended without becoming allegorical. The vehicle in the metaphysical conceit relates reciprocally with the tenor (rather than standing in for the tenor, as in allegory), so that the ideational parallels of both poles of the metaphor are developed. As Tuve points out, "no amount of 'extension' could make a . . . conceit out of a descriptive simile *unless* the extensions multiply the logical parallels" (374). In this poetic of abstract development, meant to multiply parallels, "similitudes are generally advanced not as illustrations but as arguments" (371), arguments specifically about a transcendent proposition, usually some sort of universal, to which the conceit as a whole refers and which it demonstrates by example. (Christ is thus sometimes viewed as a metaphysical conceit whose vehicle is flesh, tenor divinity, and abstract argument God's love for humanity.) In lyric contexts, the transcendent proposition is the "subject" of the poem, while the cause of any particular trope is, in Tuve's words, "the true and essential nature of the subject" (154). That "true and essential nature of the subject" does not, however, exist outside of or detached from its presentation in the poetry. According to Tuve, the "poet's subject implies not mere subject matter but the meaningful order he has imposed upon the subject matter" (154). In other words, the metaphysical poem's style, how it seems, conveys what the poem is—the transcendent subject of the poem, displayed as some order. Thus, to read "Description Without Place" with

a post-Eliot understanding of the metaphysical tradition is to take the subject of the piece as itself the *effect* of its style, a style that requires the reader to think abstractly about conceits that reveal the nature of the transcendent proposition that governs the poem.

Stevens himself claimed to see no distinction among style, subject, and aesthetic effect. In "Two or Three Ideas," he wrote that his "first proposition is that the style of a poem and the poem itself are one" (839). In the same essay he went on to say that "style is not something applied. It is something inherent, something that permeates. It is of the nature of that in which it is found, whether the poem, the manner of a god, the bearing of a man. It is not a dress" (845). In characterizing style as "the nature" of the poem, Stevens suggested the proposition from metaphysical poetics that the subject itself is the effect of the style. Indeed, in the same essay Stevens claimed that the subject "is an effect of style and not of the poem itself or at least not of the poem alone. The effective integration is not a disengaging of the subject. It is a question of the style in which the subject is presented" (840). If the ultimate aesthetic end is produced not by "the poem itself," but by the "effect" of the poem's style, then that end can emerge to "view" only in the reader's apprehension of the transcendent proposition that appears through interpretations of conceits.

In "The Irrational Element in Poetry," Stevens expressed the conviction that poetry may enact a transcendent reality: there he claimed that "it is possible to say that, while it can lie in the temperament of very few of us to write poetry in order to find God, it is probably the purpose of each of us to write poetry to find the good which, in the Platonic sense, is synonymous with God. One writes poetry, then, in order to approach the good in what is harmonious and orderly. Or, simply, one writes poetry out of a delight in what is harmonious and orderly" (786). That Stevens wrote "out of a delight in what is harmonious and orderly" suggests that the delight inheres in the organization of the poem, which then embodies the transcendent "good" as much as it approaches it. Thus Stevens, much like an early modern metaphysical poet, was, in Tuve's formulation, "concerned with imitating Cicero's 'intellectual ideal by reference to which the artist represents those objects which do not themselves appear to the eye' (*Ora-tor* iii; a Ciceronian commonplace in the Renaissance, in various phrasings)" (41). The Platonic ideal of the harmonious and orderly to which Stevens referred is, in this sense, the transcendent object that does not in itself "appear to the eye." The invisibility of this poetic object suggests why "Description Without Place" seems obscure to critics such as Helen Vendler (see esp. 218): what is harmonious and orderly in the poem is a set of relations *between* concrete objects, which is why *stylistic* relations become the "true subject" of the poem. But if the transcendent object does not appear to the inner eye, it still has an ideational solidity when the reader conceives of the harmonious analogies produced by the conceit. As Stevens put it: "what interests us is a particular process in the rational mind which

we recognize as irrational in the sense that it takes place unaccountably. Or, rather, I should say that what interests us is not so much the Hegelian process as what comes of it" (782).

The imaginative or conceptual result of a dialectic between the reader and the poem, then, is what interested Stevens. Perhaps for this reason Stevens used the conceit of metaphysical paradox to structure "Description Without Place," for such a conceit proposes, negates, and sublates all at once, producing a third term in the simultaneous presentation of thesis and antithesis, and allowing the reader to experience "what comes" of the "Hegelian process" in apprehending the paradox. (Such a connection between paradox and Hegelian dialectic does much to explain Stevens' affinity for paradox in general.) Because the result of the Hegelian process for Stevens is that "particular process in the rational mind" that "takes place unaccountably," in "Description Without Place" Stevens deployed a metaphysical paradox that itself figures that unaccountable process of the mind, thereby enabling the poem to be supremely ideal in enacting what it represents. Appropriating the metaphysical conceit of the "green mind" from Marvell's garden, Stevens used it to open up the question of the relation of the mind to the world that is the poem's ultimate subject.

The conceit of the green mind appears in stanza six of "The Garden":

Meanwhile the mind, from pleasure less,
Withdraws into its happiness:
The mind, that ocean where each kind
Does straight its own resemblance find;
Yet it creates, transcending these,
Far other worlds, and other seas;
Annihilating all that's made
To a green thought in a green shade. (Marvell 109)

The opening two lines of the stanza, in which the mind withdraws "from pleasure less," refer back to the previous stanza in which the vegetable matter surrounding the speaker in the garden is personified and becomes the body of an amorous woman, saturated with desire, who has "ensnared" the speaker, leading him to "fall on grass" (Marvell 108). So the "pleasure less" refers, then, to a pleasure that is less valuable in a hierarchy of body and mind yet is also the motivation for the mind's withdrawal into "happiness" ("from pleasure less" the mind withdraws, "from" signifying both "away from" and "the cause of"). This paradoxical carrying over and transmutation of desire into the activities of the mind means, as we shall see it does in "Description Without Place," that wherever the argument goes from here, the foundational idea of the mind's inspiration by desire shall remain.

The argument goes next into a definition of the mind as an "ocean where each kind / Does straight its own resemblance find," a definition based

on the Neoplatonic idea of the mind as a mirror recognizing and reflecting sympathetic correspondences between objects in the external world. Of course, this definition invokes what Tillyard called the "world picture" of early modern England, in which every thing could have been seen as part of a "Great Chain of Being," where all things have both hierarchical correspondence to other things above and below, and analogous correspondence to yet other things with parallel positions in their respective hierarchies (so the sun as the brightest star corresponds to the king as the superlative male, who corresponds to the eagle as the superlative bird, who lives in the realm of the sun, and so on).³ Added to this by Marvell's line is the idea that every creature of the dry land has its analogue, a watery mirror of its "kind," within the ocean. In sum, within the schema embodied in the line we have a theory of the mind as a force that recognizes analogies and correspondences.

However, as William Empson points out in his reading of "The Garden," these lines not only reiterate the historicity of a symbolic universe legible through already-defined correspondences, but also point toward a more atemporal theory of the mind animated by desire in relation to the world. As he says:

The *kinds* look for their *resemblance*, in practice, out of a desire for *creation*; in the mind, at this fertile time for the poet, they can *find* it "at once," being "packed together" [following a contemporaneous definition of the adjective "straight," as in "straightjacket"]. The transition from the beast and its reflection to the two pairing beasts implies a transition from the correspondences of thought with fact to those of thought with thought . . . and in the next couplet not only does the mind transcend the world it mirrors, but a sea, to which it is parallel, transcends both land and sea too, which implies self-consciousness and all the antinomies of philosophy. (126)

This next couplet, in which the mind "creates, transcending these, / Far other worlds, and other seas," thus implies that the antinomies of philosophy are things generated by thinking itself: in this sense, relations appear not by a process of recognition of internal and external correspondences but by a process of matching thought with thought.

Both of these ideas are synthesized in the paradoxical conceit of the final couplet in the stanza, which thus represents as it enacts through reading what comes of the Hegelian process: "Annihilating all that's made / To a green thought in a green shade." Here in one sense is the transcendent and triumphant power of the mind that creates by making the external world, the objects out there, nothing except the products of the imagination (as Empson points out, this process issues from the etymology of *annihilate*: "turning all *ad nihil*, to nothing, and *to* a thought" [119]).

In this sense, the thinker of the green thought interacts with objects as if they were part of his imagination, as the "green thought" casts the "green shade" on the elements that surround him. The correspondence of green with green then signifies the correspondence of "thought with thought" that annihilates the boundaries between the being of the thinker and the way that objects seem in the process of projection. What Empson calls the "physical power in thought itself" (120) creates this epistemological connection between being and seeming: the radiation of thought tinting everything with the color of perception causes objects to be perceived in the shade of the thought, making the way that they seem and the way that they are one.

As it is stated, however, this proposition is simultaneously negated by the paradox of the conceit. Empson formulates the negation thus: "in the first version thoughts are shadows, in the second (like the *green thought*) they are as solid as what they image; and yet they still correspond to something in the outer world, so that the poet's intuition is comparable to pure knowledge" (125). In other words, the speaker interacts with the objects of his imagination as if they were really out there; and he does so because he has absorbed what is really out there in a moment of perfect contemplation, or "pure knowledge." Here thought is the product of the green shade, not the producer of it. Yet again, there is a dissolution of boundaries between the mind and the world; not, however, in the first sense that we have seen (as the speaker is, or his mind is, so the world seems), but in the sense that as the world is, so the speaker appears inwardly. The rhetorical force of "Yet it creates, transcending these" and "Annihilating all that's made" has served to make the reader forget that the speaker does actually sit in a garden, in a "green shade" (perhaps strategically ensuring that the proposition of the mind's physical power will strike the reader first, before the sense of paradoxical negation emerges). The "green thought in a green shade" nonetheless in this second sense connotes a harmonious relation between the mind and the objects of the world resulting from a process of absorption rather than projection.

Yet what comes of the Hegelian process is that the negation is itself negated by the cognitive reemergence of the first proposition in the very comparative understanding of the second. In this final step, both senses of the paradox become true simultaneously, and this bifold truth becomes itself what the trope both represents and enacts. The conceit of the green mind signifies in suspension two opposing but harmonious relations (harmonious in the sense that they both create the same dissolution of boundaries between mind and world) between the sets of "seeming and being" and "objects and the mind." The trope thus also compels the reader to realize or enact the permutations of those relations while she is compelled to comprehend them. To say this is not to suggest that there is ever one moment definitively in which the reader *is* as the poem *seems* (or, for that matter, *seems* as the poem *is*); rather, the temporality of suspension, en-

sured by the floating gerund “Annihilating,” endlessly defers the achievement of one particular moment in time when the reader, like the speaker embodying the conceit, is able to decide the issue once and for all. To end this discussion of this conceit where it began, the endless deferral in time stems from the seed of desire that generated the original withdrawal into contemplation: to annihilate is to die, and with the pun on dying and orgasm proverbial in Marvell’s culture,⁴ what the final couplet of the stanza figures is an endless climax whereby the speaker both projects and receives in a perpetual dissolution of boundaries between the self and the world, an ever-achieved climax that paradoxically can never reach fulfillment.

I will now turn to what I take to be the intertextual beginning of “Description Without Place,” in which the “green mind” of the “queen” makes “the world around her green”:

It is possible that to seem—it is to be,
As the sun is something seeming and it is.

The sun is an example. What it seems
It is and in such seeming all things are.

Thus things are like a seeming of the sun
Or like a seeming of the moon or night

Or sleep. It was a queen that made it seem
By the illustrious nothing of her name.

Her green mind made the world around her green.
The queen is an example . . . This green queen

In the seeming of the summer of her sun
By her own seeming made the summer change.

In the golden vacancy she came, and comes,
And seems to be on the saying of her name.

Her time becomes again, as it became,
The crown and week-day coronal of her fame. (296–97)

Here is the first proposition of the Marvellian trope, the ontological connection between seeming and being in the mind: the radiation of thought, of which “The sun is an example,” tints everything with the light of its perception, causing objects to appear in its conceptual color and unifying the way things appear and the way they are. In the poem’s very first lines, then, the trope of the sun puts the reader in a relation to the poem corre-

sponding to the relation of the sun to things. The reader comprehends the sun in the tinting of her perception, and the sun is an ontological example of that very tinting comprehension. But, as an object itself, the sun also has the status of "something seeming and [something that] is." Thus immediately the poem opens up a hall of mirrors: as Empson notes about thought in Marvell's poem, "in including everything in itself the mind includes as a detail itself and all its inclusions" (126). What thought includes here as a sign of its inclusions is not only the sun, but also the "green queen," to whom the poem moves by passing through the stages of thought to fantasy: things are "like a seeming of the sun / Or like a seeming of the moon or night / Or sleep," the moon being the sign of the imagination and sleep the realm of pure dream, all objects there at once phantasmatic and effectively real. In such dreams it is "a queen" that makes it "seem / By the illustrious nothing of her name," the illustrious nothing that illustrates as it illuminates in a green shade, whereby "on the saying of her name," the nothing annihilates all that is made and "Her green mind [makes] the world around her green." This internal/external correspondence of green figures here, as it does in Marvell, the "physical power in thought" invoked by Empson, whereby "This green queen / In the seeming of the summer of her sun / By her own seeming [makes] the summer change," creating the external world, the objects out there, as nothing except the products of the imagination.

Stevens goes on to extend the implications of that proposition to history and the subjectivities that history constructs. In section II, then, history becomes the *collective* imagination manifested in the style, or the projection of the thought, of the queen: "An age is a manner collected from a queen. / An age is green or red" (297). Here we have the reiteration of the process of apprehension, with history itself as a Neoplatonic schema in which "the lesser," or the particular, "[seems] original in the blind / Forward of the eye that, in its backward, sees / The greater seeming of the major mind" (297). In this history, as in the trope itself, there is no particular content, only a perception and a relation—"An age is green or red. / An age believes / Or it denies"—but in every case the idealized macrocosm, "the major mind," is embodied in a "lesser" copy that seems "original" to the individual eye. That individual eye in turn serves as a microcosm to the larger age: "Its identity is merely a thing that seems, / In the seeming of an original in the eye, / In the major manner of a queen, the green / The red, the blue, the argent queen" (297).

Yet Stevens goes on to suggest that history, like experience, is no mere projection but a manifestation of a metaphysical scheme that the reader apprehends in abstract processes. If the reality of an age, he muses, were not the manifestation of an ideal form, "What subtlety would apparition have? / In flat appearance we should be and be, / Except for delicate clinkings not explained" (297). In this formulation, the relation of "apparition" to ideal form gives appearance and event depth and subtlety, and

this relation explains the working of the social itself, heard in clinkings, those fragile sounds of work or touch. But is the ideal form merely the explanation of an age? Stevens implicitly addresses this question by positing that this form animates seemings that are not *yet*. When he elucidates in section III the "*potential* seemings, arrogant / To be, as on the youngest poet's page, / Or in the dark musician" (298; emphasis added), he implies that actual seemings do have something to do with existence, at least on the page of the maturest poet, or in the song of the bright musician. He then elaborates:

There might be, too, a change immenser than
A poet's metaphors in which being would

Come true, a point in the fire of music where
Dazzle yields to a clarity and we observe,

And observing is completing and we are content,
In a world that shrinks to an immediate whole,

That we do not need to understand, complete
Without secret arrangements of it in the mind. (298)

It is in this fiery music that Stevens sees a potential for proving the ideal in a Marvellian moment of absorption, whereby "Dazzle yields to a clarity and we observe, / And observing is completing and we are content, / In a world that shrinks to an immediate whole. . . ." Here is the negation of the proposition that thought creates the world, for here the speaker interacts with the object of his imagination, in this case with "being" come "true," as if it were really out there in a moment of perfect contemplation, or "pure knowledge," that paradoxically we do not need to understand, since merely observing is completing. Again, there is a sort of dissolution of boundaries between the mind and the world. As in Marvell, this harmonious unity in Stevens seems endlessly potential and thus impossible to represent without deferral. Even though there "might be . . . a point in the fire of music" where the thinker achieves a state of perfect absorption, such a "change" of being would be "immenser than / A poet's metaphors. . . ."

Yet that is not the poem's final word on the subject, for Stevens suggests we do "need to understand" those "delicate clinkings" that actually may be "explained" by "secret arrangements . . . in the mind." Hence immediately after figuring an impossible potentiality, greater than a poet's metaphors, Stevens juxtaposes his previous statement with a series of paradoxical conceits about the actuality of the potential, thereby suggesting that all expressions of potentiality make actual what they represent. For just as there might be a point in the fire of music,

There might be in the curling-out of spring
A purple-leaping element that forth

Would froth the whole heaven with its seeming-so,
The intentions of a mind as yet unknown,

The spirit of one dwelling in a seed,
Itself that seed's ripe, unpredictable fruit. (298)

The paradoxical figure of the "spirit" of the "seed" itself being "that seed's ripe, unpredictable fruit" both upholds and negates the impossibility of the clarity in the fire of music: to be both potential and actual is to disprove the idea that the potential seemings are not the actual seemings and that the potential seemings fail to explain the delicate clinkings of the mind. Rather, it is to state that all figures, "like the utmost will" (298), are both potential and actual, both not yet true and already true, both of the future and of the past animated in a perpetual present of extended desire for being, which is enacted by "its seeming-so."

For this reason Nietzsche figures within section IV of the poem as the ideal metaphysical philosopher: he maintains the perpetual reversals of potentiality and actuality, "The moving and the moving" of the past into the future, "In the much-mottled motion of blank time." His are the "perpetual revolution[s]," in the etymological sense of the word, "round and round," because "his thoughts," like those of the poet, are "the colored forms . . . Wrapped in their seemings" (299) and apprehended in a moment of pure perception by absorption, which simultaneously takes place

In a kind of total affluence, all first,
All final, colors subjected in reverie

To an innate grandiose, an innate light,
The sun of Nietzsche gildering the pool. . . . (299)

Like the sun and the green queen, Nietzsche embodies the hall-of-mirrors relation between the mind and the world, between seeming and being, whereby "in including everything in itself the mind includes as a detail itself and all its inclusions."⁵ Yet it is also Nietzsche's commitment to existence as a kind of style that makes him exemplary for Stevens. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche argues that we should assume "that we are merely images and artistic projections for the true author, and that we have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art—for it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*" (52).

This aesthetic link allows Stevens to move in conclusion to something more specifically textual: "the theory of description." To Stevens "the

theory of description matters most" (301) because description is "Intenser than any actual life could be, / A text we should be born that we might read" (301). Since we have being only in our seemings, in our existence as aesthetic phenomena, we are nothing but objects with a particular inevitable voice, "a style of life" (302). Thus description of that voice, that style, is the discursive seeming in which we have our being. Description is our God, "a knowledge / Incognito, the column in the desert, / On which the dove alights" (300), or, as Nietzsche puts it, "our true author." Thus, like projecting and absorbing perception, description can never be definitively completed but rather stands, like a metaphor of potentiality itself, as "an expectation, a desire"—but one that has, like Marvell's unfulfillable climax, received its fulfillment in the "categorical predicate, the arc" (300). In this sense, as a constitutive and simultaneously comprising act, poetry is "the book of reconciliation / Book of a concept only possible / In description, canon central in itself, / The thesis of the plentifullest John" (301). Thus, Stevens continues,

the theory of description matters most.
It is the theory of the word for those

For whom the word is the making of the world,
The buzzing world and lispng firmament.

It is a world of words to the end of it,
In which nothing solid is its solid self. (301)

In this, thoughts have become words, and the dissolution of boundaries between mind and world, seeming and being, is enacted by the force of *language* to create reality, even to create materiality ("the theory of description *matters* most"), as we may experience it in a harmonious and orderly relation to an ideal that is both invisible and palpable. Thus "nothing solid" paradoxically exists as the "solid self," which has being as the subject of Stevens' poem, apprehended in the very working of the reader's mind through the seeming of the words of the poem. This is the "meaning" of "Description Without Place": the interpretive process that brings the being of objects into existence, making them "alive with [their] own seemings" (302) through the apprehension of the relations of words. As such, the meaning of the poem is not substantive but performative, insofar as language is performative while still requiring us to defer satisfaction of our desire to merge relations into transparency.

The poem sums up this endless deferral in its final conceit, "Like rubies reddened by rubies reddening" (302). Here the reversals, the Hegelian negations, remain endlessly moving in suspended climax: reddening is the becoming of the rubies reddened, which is also the seeming of the reddening rubies. Of course, there are (nearly endless) other ways to for-

mulate this. But the importance of this final trope derives not from what it signifies, but from the analogies between its ideational content and the content of the tropes already figured, for these analogies require the reader ultimately to extend thought to her own seeming and being in time. This extension, finally, engenders a dissolution of subject/object boundaries between the reader and the poem, enacting a correspondence between the mind of the reader and the textuality that is, as Stevens says, “the double of our lives, / Intenser than any actual life could be” (301). With this enacted correspondence between the mind and the textuality more intense than actual life, in the process of interpretation the reader receives the gift of that intenser life, the “wizened starlight growing young” (301). It is fitting to end, then, with one of Stevens’ rhetorical questions: “When we find in poetry that which gives us a momentary existence on an exquisite plane, is it necessary to ask the meaning of the poem?” (786). We might answer with silence, and accept the gift.

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Notes

¹ Wallace Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 296. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with page number(s) only in parentheses.

² See “The Metaphysical Poets,” T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays: 1917–1932*, esp. 247.

³ Along with Tillyard, see also Lovejoy.

⁴ See, for examples, Donne’s “The Canonization”; Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, 5.3.163–70, and *Antony and Cleopatra*, 5.2.351–66.

⁵ For a discussion of Stevens’ use in “Description Without Place” of the Nietzschean tenet that “for any being appearance is identical with reality in every respect,” see Leggett, 180–83.

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Wallace Stevens' Philosophical Evasions

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IN ORDER TO DRAW attention to an aspect of the philosophical work performed by Wallace Stevens' poetry, let me begin with a broad, simplifying sketch of two very different approaches to philosophy. Both are as old as Socrates, and their differences are primarily methodological. According to one, which might be called the problem-solving school, philosophy is confronted by conceptual problems for which solutions exist, and the goal of philosophy is to find these solutions. Philosophical questions have philosophical answers waiting to be discovered through philosophical means, and if only we could uncover these answers, which take the form of assertions, the questions would be settled once and for all. If there are no answers for certain of these philosophical questions, philosophy can and must nevertheless define, precisely, the state of affairs that explains why there are and can be no answers in these particular cases, as opposed to others. The explanation of why the puzzle cannot be unpuzzled, why the problem cannot be solved, why there are no pores through the given aporia, will also take an assertoric form.

Needless to say, the problem-solving conception of philosophy has proven so intuitively persuasive and institutionally amenable that it has dominated the field in nearly every period of its history. The model of problem-solving has ruled over philosophy with such a masterful fist that many of its proponents, in all periods, have remained wholly unaware of any alternative to it—and this, despite the curious failure (after nearly three thousand years of lifelong labors by some of the world's most brilliant minds) to establish so much as a single philosophical truth, to solve a single, fundamental philosophical problem on its own terms "once and for all." The textbook of philosophical truths, toward which all assertoric philosophy explicitly or implicitly aims, remains totally blank. Plato and Aristotle hoped for it to be filled after the manner of their admired geometers, but it has not; more recent philosophers hoped to succeed on the idealized model of the natural scientists, whose introductory textbooks brim with significant conclusions now no longer in dispute, but they have not. Instead, the usual introductory textbook of philosophy, where used at all, is likely to consist of questions rather than answers, and not even precisely the same questions as were asked fifty or a hundred or a thou-

sand years ago, which were themselves never definitively answered. Another word for problem-solving philosophy might be “dogmatism.”

Defining the alternative to philosophical dogmatism can be very difficult. Just as all happy families are alike, while every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way, so all problem-solving philosophy is united by certain characteristics, while the alternatives seem to share no common essence. We can see one alternative to dogmatic philosophy in the Socrates of Plato’s early dialogues, the figure about whom Aristotle said, “Socrates used to ask questions and not to answer them—for he used to confess that he did not know” (“Sophistical Refutations” 183b7–8). This is the Socrates who became the figurehead of academic skepticism, after the doctrinal Platonism of the later dialogues exhausted itself in Plato’s own Academy. The Socrates of the early dialogues did not claim to possess the solutions to the philosophical problems that concerned him most, such as the nature of virtue, nor did he claim to know whether or how such answers could or could not be obtained. If we view Socrates as one of the first reactions against the problem-solving conception of philosophy—against the interminable speculative disputes, for example, of the nature-philosophers who preceded him—then we can view Plato as having misread his teacher in the middle and later dialogues, relapsing into the very dogmatic asseveration that Socrates so deftly avoided.

Lacking two and a half millennia of evidence that asserting an answer to a philosophical problem will not make the problem go away, Plato can be forgiven for his dogmatic turn. But the problem-solving philosophers of today continue to write and speak as though, in Stevens’ words, they will finally “get it straight one day at the Sorbonne”:¹ as if each problem-solving philosopher, in fact, were personally in the process of drafting an essay that will finally get things right, finally nail down a few solid answers, or at least a firm accounting of the impossibility of such. It is not uncommon to hear, for example, disciples of the contemporary Anglo-American problem-solving tradition saying things such as, “I think Professor X is basically right about knowledge”—as though this were the sort of thing we have been waiting for someone to be “right” about, as though some arrangement of the word “knowledge” with other words on the pages of a research journal somewhere might finally be the *correct* one. “Did you hear? Professor X has determined what knowledge is.” “Oh? I guess I can abandon my studies then.” “What will you do?” “I will become a farmer and spend my days cultivating a garden.” A recent example of non-dogmatic philosophy would be the later, therapeutic Wittgenstein, whose early analytic interpreters, like Plato, came to misread their predecessor as having shared their problem-solving assumptions.²

A common response to philosophical dogmatism, especially among poets, has been a shift from argument into mystical assertion: a refusal to engage the gamesmanship of transitory problem-solving in favor of something else, often religious, as in T. S. Eliot’s turn from the philosophical

puzzles of his doctoral dissertation to the unargued, perhaps unarguable, mystical evocations of *Four Quartets*.³ Others have chosen philosophical silence. In the scheme of dogmatism and its alternatives, the uniqueness of Stevens' poetry lies in its peculiar refusal of either silence or mystical apodicticism. Stevens develops a unique—and in his case, necessarily poetic—way of treating philosophical problems without asserting ultimate solutions in response to them. Unlike the early Socrates or the later Wittgenstein, he does not avoid dogmatic philosophical assertion by asking only questions, or responding only without himself asserting, or asserting only things with which his interlocutor or reader could be presumed not to disagree. He does not recede into a silencing of his ultimate belief, but engages belief in a thousand shifting forms.

Rather than proceeding directly to a consideration of Stevens' poetic techniques for evading dogmatism, however, it might be useful to frame these techniques in the context of a provocative question from the philosopher Simon Critchley's recent study of Stevens, *Things Merely Are*. Critchley's main, overarching argument is that Stevens' poetry can be read as a sort of spiritual exercise, one that teaches "a certain disposition of calm, an insight into things that comes from having them in sight" (6). Through the reading of Stevens' poetry, and especially his later works, we can learn to come to terms with the constitutive epistemological limits of a Kantian world, the ultimate inaccessibility of what is represented in our representations, if anything, in this spirit of meditative calm, rather than with romantic, Coleridgean dejection. From the start of *Things Merely Are*, Critchley emphasizes the importance of poetic form to Stevens' philosophical project. He argues that Stevens' poetry "contains deep, consequent and instructive philosophical insight, and . . . that this insight is best expressed poetically" (4). Later, he notes, "As a philosopher, what it is about Stevens that interests me is the fact that he found a manner that is wholly poetic, of developing full thoughts: theses, hypotheses, conjectures, ruminations and aphorisms that one should call philosophical" (15). Again, further on, Critchley poses a related question: "What is it about the particular meditative poetic form that [Stevens] developed that is able to carry genuine philosophical weight and yet which is impossible to translate into prose?" (31). Critchley leaves the question to some extent unanswered. Though he draws attention at several crucial moments to the importance of ambiguity and qualification in Stevens' poetry, the specifically poetic form of Stevens' writing receives relatively less attention than its philosophical content, perhaps inevitably given the brevity of the book.

The closest Critchley comes to addressing the necessity of the poetic form of Stevens' work may lie in his identification of "the twofold task of poetry" (57). According to this twofold task, poetry, first, "permits us to see fiction as fiction, to see the fictiveness or contingency of the world," and, second, gives to life, in Stevens' words, "the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it" (58–59). If we set aside, how-

ever, a few suggestive but preparatory gestures toward the importance of “the sound of words” (57), Critchley’s two tasks would seem to apply equally to any form of imaginative literature, poetic or otherwise. Would it not be possible for a novel or play to perform the same tasks, reminding us of the fictiveness of the world and offering us further fictions, in prose and without any heightened attention to the sound of words? For that matter, could not a philosophical treatise or prose work of literary criticism argue just as effectively as poetry for the fictiveness of the world? Could it then not go on to offer us “supreme fictions,” as many of the great imaginative creations of philosophy might seem to have done, and, as Critchley elsewhere suggests, they have done?⁴ To go even further afield, if Terrence Malick’s films can perform philosophical work that is similar to that of Stevens’ late poetry, as Critchley suggests in the final chapter of *Things Merely Are*, then do we not have reason to believe that poetry is, strictly speaking, not necessary to such work? (And if Malick’s fundamentally more visual than verbal films can teach a disposition of philosophical calm, then why not a painting by Mark Rothko, Mies van der Rohe’s Barcelona Pavilion, or Gustav Mahler’s 10th Symphony as well?) In essence, how might the philosophical work that Critchley ascribes to Stevens’ poetry require the kind of highly crafted, densely figured and musical language that is usually identified as “poetic,” whether or not it follows a meter, whether or not it is lineated? A decade before his book on Stevens, Critchley crafted the memorable epigram, “Poetry needs a philosophy that needs poetry” (“Ancient” 26). But how could this be? How could thought ever benefit from being formed in the mud heap of poetic language rather than the clear waters of prose philosophy? How is it possible for any “insight” or “thesis” to be articulable in poetry but untranslatable into prose? Critchley’s concise treatment of philosophy in the poetry of Stevens leaves this line of questioning relatively open.

The remainder of this essay attempts to clarify a single, relatively narrow respect in which poetry can perform philosophical work that prose, as such, cannot: the evasion of philosophical dogmatism through Stevensian qualification. The essential techniques of Stevens’ anti-dogmatic art both are necessarily poetic and have been recognized by critics since early in the poet’s reception. In fact, they form one of the most consistent themes in the formalist critical reception of his work. They are what Helen Vendler, in a celebrated early essay, calls Stevens’ “qualified assertions,” and what Marjorie Perloff calls Stevens’ “ironic modes.” Drawing from the techniques noted by the two critics, and by the many others who have followed, we can briefly catalogue the following instruments for the evasion of philosophical dogmatism in Stevens’ poetry:

- his frequent and intricate evasions of “is” through a mobile army of modal auxiliaries, his “may,” “might,” “must,” “could,” “should,” and “would”;

- his more overt, stylistically definitive “as ifs,” “ifs,” “and yet,” “perhapses,” “seemses,” “Say that . . . s,” and “Suppose that . . . s”;
- his sapping of the apparent sense of a passage through the deployment of oxymoron, paradox, and the superfluity of nonsensical sound;
- his seemingly perpetual openness to qualification of a statement after the fact, even within the same poem, no matter how exceptionally solid or even desperately assertive the statement might at first have seemed;
- his sometimes dazzling distribution of logical connectives such as “or,” “if,” “since,” which, like the intricate ornaments of a baroque cathedral, can ultimately issue into a self-dissolution of their own elaborate detail, resulting in a transcendent simplicity;
- his abundant observations, *à propos* of nothing, that things are “not” or are “no longer” what no one would ever have assumed them to be: “It was not from the vast ventriloquism / Of sleep’s faded papier-mâché” (452)—without, as often as not, going on to assert what *is* the case;
- his (to quote Vendler) “distinctive appropriation” of the modal “must” and its related “had to,” “cannot,” and “could not,” with the connotations less of “necessity” or “clear obligation” than of the “constraint, the sadness, the attempts at self-conviction, the enforced nobility” of “obligations or destinies of a less voluntary sort” (166);
- his use of free-floating infinitives, imperatives without known addressee, and constructions casting toward a future, gestures away from the facts as they stand to the imaginable, possible, ought-to-be, desired;
- his frequent questions, seemingly rhetorical, but in fact not so much disguised assertions as “suggestions” (166);
- and above all, his characteristic, almost constant, wriggling of syntax away from the rigidity of plain statement, especially between the iterations of repeated words: “All night I sat reading a book, / Sat reading as if in a book / Of somber pages” (118). (Which is it, reading a book or reading as if in a book? As Vendler suggests, Stevens lets the sense shift in time as the phrase unfolds [174]).⁵

Has there ever been a more subtle and elaborated practice of qualified philosophical assertion than that which appears in Stevens' verse? His specific brand of anti-dogmatism draws for the most part on qualifying turns of phrase and constructions that might appear, for example, in nearly any philosophical writing—but deployed through repetition and intensification to a qualitatively different effect, along with an array of devices unique to poetry. (Insofar as prose contained some of the devices listed above, such as the splicing of syntactical forms, we would be to that extent more likely to label it “prose-poetry,” or at least to call it “poetic.”) Stevens' evasions cannot simply be dismissed as assertions rhetorically hedged against counterargument, because the qualification is part and parcel of the assertion. Nor can the assertive aspect simply be ignored, as though the poetry were somehow *all* qualification and *no* assertion: without the assertion, the qualification could not qualify. The qualification of a qualified assertion cannot be thought without the assertion, and vice versa. A language poet might attempt the preemptive, indefinite qualification of an assertion that never arrives, but this is not Stevens' mode. His qualified assertions come whole and uncleaved, with the result that we do not always know what to make of his “edgings and inchings of final form” (417), to borrow a phrase from “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven.” The structure of this well-known phrase, incidentally, maps isomorphically onto the structure of the concept “qualified assertion”: the “edgings and inchings” at once oppose themselves to any “final form” and yet are “of” it. So does the qualification oppose itself to the assertion and yet depend upon it. The two sides of the qualified assertion, in other words, must go hand in hand. Or is it that what Stevens offers with one hand he takes away with another? Are we finally left empty-handed? What is the purpose of this fantastic legerdemain?

The idea of “qualification” in a rhetorical context tends to have one of two senses: one qualifies an assertion in the sense of rendering it more precise; or one qualifies an assertion by softening its force, moderating the degree to which the assertion is asserted, insisted upon, set forth as true. Perhaps we can imagine a scale of assertoric force, with, at one end, an unyielding assertion such as, “It is certain indisputably, beyond any possible doubt, that Wallace Stevens is the most philosophically interesting poet in the English language.” Qualifying the assertion, in the sense of tempering its assertoric force, we could say, more simply, “Wallace Stevens is the most philosophically interesting poet in the English language.” Going further, we might arrive at, “Wallace Stevens may well be the most philosophically interesting poet in the English language.” The further we went, the less we would assert our assertion, the less dogmatic we would become: “It is as if Wallace Stevens is, or could be seen as, the most philosophically interesting poet in the English language.” Or even further: “Say that Stevens, among English poets, is not the least of philosophers, or if the most, since poetical, suppose him to be the most of the poet's philo-

sophical might." As if traveling by asymptote, we move further and further away from the strong-armed dogmatism of the opening phrase. But we remain on assertoric territory, despite the potentially almost limitless qualification. We qualify our assertion, rather than abstracting the question of our belief entirely from the scene as Socrates might do. We do not simply propose. The assertion maintains some hold over us, not simply as a description of a belief that one might have, as in a thought experiment, or as the detached report of a belief held by someone else, but as something we ourselves might say, think, believe. The assertion revolves in consideration over a possible position, handled in a distinctive way, so that the possible belief remains alive. Again, Stevens avoids dogmatism not by asking only questions ("the early Socrates"), or asserting only that with which his interlocutor can be presumed already to agree ("the later Wittgenstein"), or by using his speech as a kind of skeptical tool without actual belief in what is said ("Sextus Empiricus"), or by occasionally qualifying everything he has asserted retroactively as just a good way of talking ("pragmatism"), but by cooling his assertoric force until it sometimes approaches, but never reaches, despite its enormous wintry-mindedness, an impossible zero degree.

The work of Stevensian qualification seems to encompass both making an assertion more precise and lessening its assertoric force, and if its peculiar art lies especially in the latter, it is capable of the former as well. (Indeed, the two categories might be seen as not entirely distinct: the lessening of assertoric force could, at a stretch, be seen as a form of making an assertion more "modally precise.") His devices allow us not only to approach our asymptote of unassertoric assertion, but to qualify in the other sense, to render more precise: to qualify "the most philosophically interesting poet in the English language" with "who lived in the twentieth century," for example.⁶ Such lawyerly honing in on finely delineated semantic precision has a role in Stevens' poetry, but it is not necessarily an anti-dogmatic one. After all, many of the most dogmatic philosophers have been expert at "qualifying" in the sense of restricting the meaning of a claim with the help of endlessly elaborated *ad hoc* distinctions. Dogmatic philosophy has tended to be less aware of the possible philosophical significance of the other sense of "qualification," that of lessened assertoric force. G. P. Baker, a Wittgenstein scholar who once wrote at the forefront of the analytical reception but came to question that approach later in life, describes in a late essay the inattention paid by some of his colleagues to Wittgenstein's qualifications. "Ironically," Baker notes, "the neglect of such qualifications, and even of modal auxiliaries such as 'need not,' 'may,' etc., is a conspicuous aspect of many expositions and analyses of Wittgenstein's ideas, as if these niceties were not worthy of attention among philosophers" (70). The philosophy that sees no real significance in the difference between "we might say" and "it is so" may also tend to ignore the embodied, contingent, and more "literary" features of language in

general. "As if" will give way to the procrustean "is," context will melt into air, "would" and "seem" will fall by the wayside, metaphor will cash out into simile into assertion of specific similarities. In general, any aspect of a sentence not readily translatable to logical symbols will run the risk of being bowdlerized. The result is "precision," "clarity," and "rigor."

The roots of this contemporary analytic approach to language may lie partly in Gottlob Frege's imagining the "sense" (*Sinn*) of a sentence as something existing apart from the contingent material of any particular language, as if it were a sort of self-standing, disembodied substrate lying beneath the linguistic signs in which it happens to be "represented" or "expressed." If poetry is what is lost in translation, the Fregean "sense" is what remains.⁷ But in Stevens, the *Ding an sich* is not just a thought; it is three syllables of tuneful German: "a vocable thing," "a visible thing" (23, 24), as Stevens writes in "The Comedian as the Letter C." Once language, meaning, sense, propositions, or beliefs are seen as concrete, spatio-temporal matters, embodied somewhere and somewhen, whether as ink on the page, vibrations in the ear, or habits of action, questions about the *Ding an sich* become, also and inescapably, questions of "the *Ding an sich*," the specific, concrete written or spoken words. Philosophical dogmatism, for a variety of reasons, becomes more difficult to sustain.

Rather than whittling down the sense of an assertion to a sharp, indisputable point, Stevens' verse more often moves between and among fairly simple, more indefinite claims. We do not drive toward an ultimate refinement of a crude beginning, like a perfect geometrical pattern hewn out of rough stone, but shift from one relatively plain form, often half-glimpsed or indistinctly qualified, to another. We move through Stevens' qualified assertions as in a gallery, or as on one of the long, rambling weekend walks he took during his youthful stay in New York.⁸ Continuing the metaphor, we could say that the Stevensian mode of philosophical thinking is peripatetic, but not in the Aristotelian sense: it is philosophy of wandering, of error in its root meaning. Stevens did not, in the manner of an Aristotelian scholastic, consume a lifetime of massively complex philosophical distinctions, digest them, and ultimately regurgitate them in masterfully synthesized form; rather, he selected a few appetizingly simple, sometimes paradoxical materials from the philosophical buffet and tasted or tested them in various, subtly altered combinations. Even when the philosophical work of his poetry appears most internally differentiated, most complicated and ornate, the materials, though elusive, remain relatively plain. They have been transmuted through the "literary" or rhetorical devices that are not supposed to make any difference to philosophical sense, but that Stevens uses to such startling philosophical effect.

Virtually every poem in the Stevens canon displays some of the qualificative devices detailed above, and the more overtly philosophical poems likewise contain qualified assertion of a philosophical kind. "The Ultimate Poem Is Abstract," a minor, twenty-one line work from *The Au-*

roras of Autumn, will provide an especially fitting illustration of the sort of philosophical work that Stevens' poetry can perform. Despite the declarative finality of its title, "The Ultimate Poem Is Abstract" is in fact a typically unresolving and qualificative meditation on questions without final answers, and their seeming inevitability. The poem's irresolution is so thoroughgoing that it refuses, in its final two stanzas, even to resolve itself to being unresolved: it closes with a glimpse of a hope or longing for precisely the kind of reassuring fixity and rest that its preceding five stanzas seemed to deny. The poem begins:

This day writhes with what? The lecturer
On This Beautiful World Of Ours composes himself
And hems the planet rose and haws it ripe,

And red, and right. The particular question—here
The particular answer to the particular question
Is not in point—the question is in point. (369)

Our first sense that "The Ultimate Poem Is Abstract" may not deliver on the stark resoluteness of its title—that the title will not have been abstracted, straightforwardly, from what the poem contains—comes in the opening line, not a statement but a question: "This day writhes with what?" We find ourselves not so much at the beginning of a poem as in the middle of an incomplete thought preceding the composition of a poem: a blocked passage from which the poem never fully releases us. What is our first model of assertion? The temporizing "lecturer," who seems to have committed himself to a discourse on "This Beautiful World Of Ours" for which he is not adequately prepared, fills the silence with an exhausted rhetoric of alliteration ("rose," "ripe," "red"), and putters to a stop at the unconvincing assurance, culminating his hems and haws, that the planet is "right." After making anxiously explicit the importance of addressing the opening question as a question rather than immediately asserting an answer, the poem continues:

If the day writhes, it is not with revelations.
One goes on asking questions. (369)

Even the assumption in the poem's opening question, its seemingly stable or quasi-assertive aspect, is soon qualified by a Stevensian "if": "If the day writhes, it is not with revelations." We can no longer even be certain that the day writhes, since the grounds for the question have themselves been qualified, called into question. From this perspective, "If the day writhes, it is not with revelations" does not so much offer a first triangulation of a final answer to the opening question as a comment *on* the question: if the day writhes, it is not with answers to questions such as,

"This day writhes with what?" In fact, we might be tempted to say that if the day of this poem writhes with anything, it is with questions, snake-like, and moreover questionings of questions, like the proverbial serpent of self-devouring paradox that swallows its own tail. In sedate, colloquial tones, the poem concludes that questioning is our inescapable lot—"That, then, is one / Of the categories," as if asking questions were one of the fundamental forms of human understanding and, we might add, since this is the errant Stevens, of human misunderstanding. Previous poetic imaginings of our heroic imaginative powers, as in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," have overreached, and as a result the "placid space" of our existence is "not so blue as we thought," because, "To be blue, / There must be no questions" (369). Having qualified blue "revelation[]" down to the counterpoised, less blue "question," the poem seems to have taken us to a midpoint of relative stability, a tentative conclusion about the inconclusiveness of our world.

It might seem at first glance highly presumptuous, and in all likelihood incomprehensible, to conclude that "asking questions" belongs among the categories, alongside Aristotle's list of ten (substance, quantity, quality . . . asking questions?) or, more probably, given Stevens' usual frames of reference, Kant's table of twelve (unity, plurality, totality, reality . . . asking questions?).⁹ But this baffling conclusion does not arrive shrouded in grand dogmatic pomp or the robes of metaphysical certainty. On the contrary, it rests on nothing more than an informal observation ("One goes on asking questions"), probably the most humble of conclusive terms (not "therefore," not "thus," but merely "then"), and the equally abbreviated and simple "So said. . . ." A metaphor for the inescapability of questioning, the way in which (like Kant's categories) our questions help to constitute how things appear for us, the conclusion of the inference ("That, then, is one / Of the categories") does not offer an absolute stability, but a qualified one—qualified by the humble route of its arrival and the fallibility of the steps that brought us to it.

What follows could stand as an epigraph to any study of qualifications in Stevens' language and thought and their significance. Speaking of this "placid space" in which we are, now changed and less heroic-romantically "blue," the poem goes on:

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

Writhings in wrong obliques and distances,
Not an intellect in which we are fleet. . . . (369–70)

Reality offers resistance to us, limits our fleetness of movement, the realization of our imaginings. It is possible for us to be wrong and to fail in

our intellectual creations. Our strengths are themselves qualified, restricted. As in Stevens' earlier "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," it is clear

that we live in a place
That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves
And hard it is in spite of blazoned days. (332)

Even in the intellect, we are more subjects than sovereigns, more inhabitants than possessors. Our mind is not some heavenly receiver, "present / Everywhere in space at once, cloud-pole / Of communication" (370). The serpentine windings and writhings of our thoughts do not circle toward a single center where the answers lie. It is as if Stevens composes a picture here of the usual movements of thought in his poetry. The sense of an assertion is as often as not ambiguous, not a single "winding" but an indefinite quantity of "windings"; the qualification winds *round* the assertion, without arriving at the center; and one qualified assertion frequently gives way to a conflicting other, as if with a change of mind or point of view, the centripetal winding-round giving way to an uncentered "to and fro": one does not "dodge" *toward* something, but away.

Applying the tripartite schema of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," we could say that the heart of "The Ultimate Poem Is Abstract" lies not in *abstraction*, as its title might suggest, but in *change*: the change brought about by the questioning that the poem considers, though not unconditionally, as our constitutive condition; the change that brought us from "This day writhes with what?" to the more qualified "If the day writhes," and from the lecturer's musings of rightness to the writhings of the intellect "to and fro." Or perhaps abstraction is itself a kind of change. *Abs-trahere*, to draw away: the title may suggest that what is "ultimate" pulls back from us, and must do so by its nature because, as Critchley's Stevens suggests throughout his later poetry, to be "us" is to fail to possess things in their ultimacy, in finality and completion. The ultimate anything—poem, reality, answer—would have to abstract itself from our questioning categories.

Surprisingly, however, the poem ends neither on a note of abstraction nor of change, but in a vision of the third category from "Notes": *pleasure*. It envisions a peaceful enjoyment arriving through stability, not through an authentic or playful acknowledgment of groundlessness:

It would be enough
If we were ever, just once, at the middle, fixed
In This Beautiful World Of Ours and not as now,

Helplessly at the edge, enough to be
Complete, because at the middle, if only in sense,
And in that enormous sense, merely enjoy. (370)

As clauses of qualification accumulate, employing so many of the devices catalogued in the list above, the precise nature of the qualifications begins to fall away. We are left with an unexpected simplicity, here, “[to] merely enjoy.” (In a typically Stevensian instance of syntax distorting itself through the iterations of a not-quite-parallel structure, the “to” must be carried all the way down from “to be.”¹⁰) At an antipode from the poem’s assertoric title, we arrive at anything but a dogmatic, unquestioned assertion. It “would be,” “If,” “just once,” “and not,” “enough,” “if only,” “in that enormous sense,” to “merely enjoy.” Not “it will be . . . when we are,” but “It would be . . . if we were”: a modal modification from future necessity to contingency. Not the absolute “good” but the relative “enough.” Soon the “we” drops out entirely and leaves us with the even more indefinite “it would be . . . to be.” The closing, hypothetical vision of completeness has as modest a scope as possible: “just once,” not “always.” It shifts from the much greater demand “to be / Complete” to the lesser idea of centeredness “only in sense”: no longer to *be* complete but to *feel* so, without demanding objective confirmation. For this poem, “only in sense” is itself an “enormous sense,” sufficient for us to “merely enjoy.” Again, in paraphrasing we lose the sense of a drawn-out dissonance in the syntax between “to” and its final resolution in “enjoy,” a dissonance like that in a piece of music that draws out the listener’s expectation for several long moments before returning, finally, to the tonic.

As Vendler notes, Stevens’ “untoward modulations of tense are simply not available to the critic who tries to paraphrase Stevens in prose” (165). It might be possible to say, in summing up some of the above interpretation, “The ultimate poem is abstract; but our human poem, it appears, must be qualified. We will find ourselves complete only by abandoning the demand for objective confirmation of our completeness.” But it is important to recognize that the poem does not conclude, assertively, that we are doomed to inconclusiveness. It qualifies its way to a qualified end. Any philosophical paraphrase, to the degree that it achieves a helpfully definitive assertoric synthesis, must to that degree lose touch with what may be Stevens’ most significant philosophical work in the poem.

Joan Richardson records in her biography of Stevens that the poet harbored a secret wish to be the Dante of his time, and in one respect we can now see how his dream could one day, at least in a small way, come true (212). We remember Dante, at least in part, as the poet of medieval scholasticism, a philosophical movement whose most remarkable feature may be the degree to which it no longer exists. It is a dead tradition, or as dead as such a dominant philosophical tradition can become. There are vanishingly few philosophers who directly concern themselves with finding the correct solution to the arcane scholastic puzzles that Aquinas and his contemporaries, predecessors, and followers attempted to solve (“Is the understanding of the angel identical with his substance?”). One reason, of course, is that epistemology displaced scholasticism as the dominant West-

ern philosophical tradition. Contemporary philosophers, such as Richard Rorty, who advocate setting aside the tired skeptical problems of epistemology, and with them the epistemological tradition in general, often point to the demise of scholasticism as a model for the possibility of changing the philosophical conversation. (The fact that Rorty's call for an end to epistemology puzzling has so often been misconstrued as a call to end *philosophy* illustrates how deeply rooted epistemology continues to be. For many, it may be difficult to imagine a viable philosophy without a focus on solving epistemology-related problems.¹¹) Like the work of Stanley Cavell, Stevens' closest philosophical peer in the exploitation of qualified assertion, Stevens' poetry and prose dwell in the intercalations of narrowly philosophical, epistemological problems and problems of broader human scope. If the era of epistemology ever comes to an end, just as medieval scholasticism once did, Stevens may get his wish. He may become the poet of epistemology, the Dante of our perhaps fading philosophical era. One day a student's first exposure to the idea that there is some threatening "abyss" of epistemic uncertainty between me and the things and people around me may come from a poem by Wallace Stevens.

Unable to understand the pathos of the situation, the student may ask his professor for some explanation, and the professor may helpfully offer: "But how can you be *certain* that you are not deceived by demons, or that you are not a brain in a vat? And if you cannot be certain of that, how can you be certain of *anything*?" The student may shrug, slightly perplexed that so much was made out of so little, if in fact it was. But if he returns to the poetry of Stevens with a suitably wintry mind, he may come to understand the odd contours of the epistemological way of thinking, its dualistic hopes and disappointments. He may eventually read the following passage from Stevens' late poem "The Rock":

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

And so exists no more. This is the cure
Of leaves and of the ground and of ourselves. (447)

It seems to me no coincidence that in some of Stevens' final poems, the closest he comes to a resolution of what he calls "the dumbfounding abyss / Between us and the object" (375), perhaps the central dilemma of an epistemologized world, comes in a form suited to the ongoing questioning and qualifying evasions of his poetry. By making "meanings" (plural) of the inhuman rock, by making of the rock's barrenness a thousand poetic images and sounds, covering it in the overabundant leaves of an unresolving human imagination, rather than by searching for the single dogmatic answer allegedly lodged impenetrably within it, poetry may

cure us not of our limitations in the face of the rock—these often appear in Stevens' final poems to be inescapable—but of the sense that through the rock we are chained to something beyond consolation, a "total leaflessness" (407) in a barren sense. Poetry will not assert, as dogmatic philosophy might, that the problem of the rock is an epistemological or ontological question of the rock's nature. It will not assert an answer. Rather, it will be through the overflowing multiplicity of images, qualifications, fictions, and sounds, precisely those linguistically embodied and contingent aspects of Stevens' thought that dogmatic philosophy might most tend to ignore, that the rock as an unappeasable desolation might be "cured."

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Notes

¹ Wallace Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 351. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with page number only in parentheses.

² For a comparison of the later Wittgenstein's methods with those of Sextus Empiricus, see Robert Fogelin's *Wittgenstein* (226–34). Of course, a broad sketch such as the one offered above can be defended only, if at all, at its own panoramic level of generality. Nearly any individual philosopher will show traces of both schools in practice. The metaphilosophically undogmatic American pragmatist, for example, can sound decidedly dogmatic in the heat of debate, asserting and defending some pragmatic deflation of a concept as if it were made indisputably true by the nature of things, while a seemingly dogmatic philosopher such as Berkeley can sound almost undogmatic when he steps back and speaks of his theories as if they were *simply* tools for clearing away needless skeptical doubts. The possible avoidances of dogmatism performed by many more recent "Continental" philosophers present especially knotty problems of interpretation.

³ For more on Eliot's dissertation and his path through skepticism to religion, see my "The Alleged Pragmatism of T. S. Eliot" (263).

⁴ As Critchley himself writes in "The ancient quarrel," his review of Mark Edmundson's *Literature Against Philosophy*, "the so-called 'final vocabularies' of the major philosophers abound in creative metaphors . . . and philosophy at its best displays a poetic inventiveness, a coining of concepts that is similar to (but not the same as) the myth-making power of a major poet" (26). Critchley criticizes Edmundson for not having considered "the comparative merits of philosophical versus poetic language; for example, the felicity of propositional versus non-propositional forms of utterance" (26).

⁵ Among the many sources to which a reader might be directed for more thorough treatments of the formal devices listed above, the most comprehensive and illuminating single work remains Helen Vendler's "The Qualified Assertions of Wallace Stevens." My account of qualified assertion is especially indebted to Vendler's study. Marjorie Perloff echoes Vendler's thesis in a condensed form in her "Irony in *The Rock*" (111). For more on the qualifying force of Stevens' auxiliaries, see Roger Gilbert's entertaining and thorough "Verbs of Mere Being: A Defense of Stevens' Style." Gilbert draws attention to Stevens' tendency to employ auxiliaries in conjunction with "to be" verbs, especially when those verbs serve to assert (196). Beverly Maeder provides a complementary investigation of the philosophical and linguistic questions underlying Stevens' "to be" verbs in Part II of her *Wallace Stevens' Experimental Language*. For a more detailed investigation of the "enigmatic nonsense" of Stevens, see Alison Rieke's *The*

Sense of Nonsense. For more on the dazzling quality of Stevens' logical connectives, see the similar point made by Vendler at 175. The general model of excessive complexity dissolving into simplicity can be found in an especially developed form in Walter Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Benjamin describes the ceaseless accumulation of fragments and allegorical meanings in baroque drama as a mode that issues ultimately into the denial of all detail and discrete reference in favor of the apotheosis of a theological absolute. For more on the "not" construction, see P. Michael Campbell and John Dolan's "Teaching Stevens's Poetry through Rhetorical Structure." Campbell and Dolan coin a term for this characteristically Stevensian trope: "praeteritic antithesis." According to the general structure of antithesis, one term is asserted and another, contrasting term is denied, whereas in the specialized structure of praeteritic antithesis, the rhetorical attention bestowed on the denied term so exceeds that given to the asserted term that the latter, the term which we would generally expect to occupy the privileged position in any antithesis, tends instead to disappear from view. See 175–76 for Vendler's related treatment of the "not X but Y" formula in Stevens. As a final note, I am deeply indebted to the very helpful comments, questions, and references provided by two anonymous reviewers at *The Wallace Stevens Journal*.

⁶ In fact, the inspiration for this phrase comes from Critchley's opening statement in *Things Merely Are*, "In my view, Wallace Stevens is the philosophically most interesting poet to have written in the twentieth century" (15).

⁷ See "On *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*," in which Frege distinguishes between the *ideas* subjectively associated with a proper name by various individuals at various times; the *sense* of a proper name, "which is . . . no longer subjective like the idea, but is yet not the object itself"; and the *Bedeutung* of a proper name, which "is the object itself which we designate by using [the proper name]" (155). "The difference between a translation and the original text," Frege writes, "should properly not overstep the first level" (155), that is, the level of ideas. The sense can and should remain the same, though the language of its expression has changed.

⁸ For a consideration of "the walk" and its movement of traversal in Stevens' poetry, see Roger Gilbert's chapter on Stevens in his *Walks in the World* (75–106). Gilbert's thoughts on traversal echo Jonathan Levin's reading of Stevens as a poet of transition in *The Poetics of Transition* (167–98). Beverly Maeder, in turn, arrives at a similar vision of the "motility" of Stevens' "word-worlds" (73).

⁹ See the entry on "Categories" in Howard Caygill's *Kant Dictionary* (102).

¹⁰ William W. Bevis, following Vendler, makes a similar point in *Mind of Winter* (103).

¹¹ Even as unorthodox a philosopher as Critchley seems to sympathize with those who present the relation between "thought and things or mind and world" as "arguably the fundamental concern of philosophy" (*Things* 4). By contrast, others might argue that the fundamental concern of philosophy is to ground the truth-claims of other fields of inquiry, perhaps through the study of logic or language rather than thought or mind. A contemporary philosopher such as Alexander Nehamas might note that philosophy has often, following Socrates, concerned itself fundamentally with how best to live rather than with skeptical questions regarding the nature of things. Rorty might suggest that the leading concerns of the figures sometimes labeled as "philosophers," from Parmenides and Pascal to Marx, Thoreau, and Foucault, have been so diverse and variously weighted as to render hopeless, or at least arbitrary, the search for any single fundamental concern.

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**“Shall I uncrumple this much-crumpled thing?”:
Wallace Stevens’ Poetics of Sequence in
“Sea Surface Full of Clouds”**

PHOEBE PUTNAM

*And you O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to
connect them,
Till the bridge you will need be form’d, till the ductile anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.*
—Walt Whitman, “A Noiseless Patient Spider”

WALLACE STEVENS COULD never have written lines like these. He does not share Whitman’s dream of “*the bridge*,” nor of “*the ductile anchor*,” nor of “*the gossamer thread*”—the dream of consistent and stable form. Yet, lacking such a dream, he does give us pause, cause us to wonder how might such a skeptical poetry access the “measureless oceans of space,” those arenas seemingly outside imaginative comprehension, if not by such trusty emblems as bridge, anchor, thread, or, even, soul. He invites us to question the kind of grasp on the world that a poetry such as his might seek and attempt to secure.

What we find is that, throughout Stevens’ body of work, it is the “measureless oceans,” the most imaginatively prohibitive spaces, that which he glibly refers to in “Sea Surface Full of Clouds” as “An uncertain green, / Piano-polished,”¹ that serve not as obstructions but rather as prompts that enable his extensive, elaborational lyric sequences. What we find, in other words, is that it is these uninhabitable spaces that urge and allow Stevens to find the poetic thread that may catch, again and again, upon the surface of the natural world, despite the odds. It is this sense of “catch,” this quality of lyric “purchase”—or traction—that interests me here. I suggest that Stevens’ sequences in particular are intent upon articulating and then remonstrating with the terrible poetic doubt that all poets face in some way or another, namely that the imagination and the natural world are incompatible. Whereas Whitman conjures firm images and emblems to propel himself across the gap between poet and environment, Stevens applies imaginative crampons to the “Piano-polished” external world, generat-

ing in the process a series of what may be thought of as indentations—indentations that, I suggest, can be seen to exhibit an inspired rhythm, a structural poetics of the crease, the crumple, the fold.

Singular, slick forms—at every scale and level of thought—are transformed under Stevens' touch into extensive and vexed poetic structures. Even the definitive perspective of "the," as definite article, becomes suspect, as the poet's own refractions of the singular images from "A Noiseless Patient Spider" make clear. In "Metaphors of a Magnifico," Stevens philosophically disassembles "the" Whitmanian bridge to the extent that it becomes unrecognizable as anything that could once have sponsored allegory:

Twenty men crossing a bridge,
Into a village,
Are twenty men crossing twenty bridges,
Into twenty villages,
Or one man
Crossing a single bridge into a village. (15)

Likewise, in "The Idea of Order at Key West," the poet absolves his anchors from the obligation of proverbial fixity, transferring and reformulating their expected stabilizing power into a newly arresting image, that of manifold, glowing, "tilting" fishing lights:

Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know,
Why, when the singing ended and we turned
Toward the town, tell why the glassy lights,
The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,
As the night descended, tilting in the air,
Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,
Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,
Arranging, deepening, enchanting night. (106)

Even the gossamer thread is reconceived, in "The Plot Against the Giant," as a multiplicity of threads, serving in the unlikely function of abashing, through colors so small no giant could see them, the Goliath-like antagonist. Unlike the thread vested with hope in "A Noiseless Patient Spider," Stevens' threads are simultaneously exquisite and absurd, visible and unseen, functional and utterly inept.

Second Girl

I shall run before him,
Arching cloths besprinkled with colors
As small as fish-eggs.
The threads
Will abash him. (5)

Such a refractive style configures expansive, often indefinite, plurals of bridge, anchor, and gossamer thread, if it allows for them at all. In highest sympathy with Whitman's ceaseless musing and venturing, as well as his seeking of spheres, Stevens nonetheless much prefers to defer singular conceptual forms, elaborating instead the variegated multiplicity of what is, for him in his own way, the real. He therefore cannot idealize anything dependent upon an "until" ("Till the bridge you will need be form'd"); nor can he desire that by which the poetic self could achieve absolute arrival or transcendent contact (or sustained mastery²), whether it be conceived as "the" bridge, "the" anchor, or "the" thread. He muses instead on twenty bridges, anchors that are subordinate to the arranging power of fishing-boat lights, and threads, that, although caviar-like and colorful, factor as only one out of three means of eccentric defense (fragrant geraniums and delicate phonetics being the alternative weapons) against a hacker-bearing yokel.

With respect to structure, it is the lyric sequence that best expresses Stevens' independence from the dream of the absolute. When formed in isometric parts, as is the case with most of Stevens' sequences, such a form invites a possible reading of any one lyric as structurally interchangeable for any other, and therefore resists its own finality of form, its own instrumental status as bridge, anchor, thread. One of Stevens' many variational sequences, "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," takes the vastness of a calm ocean, the immeasurability of a still and yet changing surface, and seduces us with its visions of the non-absolute, the endless possibilities of the non-teleological. Stevens chooses five isometric parts of eighteen lines (six pentameter tercets) as a compromise between discursive extension and compacted scale, rising to the imagination's challenge to carve nature's immensity and flux into reasonably delicate, *amuse-bouche*-like proportions.

Much attention has been given to the relationships among the parts of the poem and between the parts and the larger poem; it seems useful, therefore, to consider closely the poetics of this poem from another angle, namely, the way in which Stevens reveals the individual lyric within the sequence to be capable of a most intricate and powerful unfolding, to be capable of generating sequence. It seems important here, as well, to consider the kinds of unfoldings Stevens has considered and experimented with in other poems from *Harmonium* and the way in which he fosters, in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," a structural poetics of what he would later call "This *vif*, this dazzle-dazzle of being new / And of becoming" (449).³

Like the abashing threads in "The Plot Against the Giant," the aquatic vistas of "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" are both idiosyncratic and riveting. In each lyric of the sequence, the speaker evokes the beauty of sunlight splashed across deck and sea with a highly decorative, and occasionally indecorous, lexicon. Stevens' diction seems at times oddly inapposite, with its specifically gastronomic interests (not "pancake," perhaps—a comparison to the Pacific his wife had made in her journal⁴—but "chocolate,"

"breakfast," "jelly," "milk," "chop-house," "obese," "pistache," "saltiest," "saucers"). One wonders why sensory pleasures seem to be so much a part of what one might think would be a neutral, descriptive sequence, a sequence with a transparent and impersonal mind of summery sea surfaces.

Before Stevens appeals to the sensualist's hunger in this sequence, however, he repels it: the poem opens with a strange, steady tone of travelogue: "In that November off Tehuantepec, / The slopping of the sea grew still one night" (82). Logical syntax, temporal precision ("In *that* month, in X place, Y happened, at Z time of day"), and a rising accentual meter serve to obstruct the possibility of spontaneous experience. The lines seem designed to create dramatic suspense of a prosaic and conventional kind: what nocturnal tentacle will disturb these waters?²⁵ But the geographic and temporal detail that is used to introduce the lyric is soon found not to buttress narrative or even dramatic progression so much as to sponsor a kind of poetic traction for the aspectual imagination. Using this double "tread," the poet pushes off of and away from the stale tempo of travelogue into lyric.

The mind's methods of resisting dominating presences have interested Stevens since his very earliest poems. A small firecat diverts a stampeding herd of bucks, pushing them right, pushing them left, simply by standing "in the way" (3). The group fans out; the individual stays put. By another token, Stevens also imagines situations in which the dominating figure is diverted by a multiplicity of presences. In "The Plot Against the Giant," the mind as a multiplicity of Ariels against a single Caliban tries this, now that, uses scent, color, and whispered sounds to check, abash, and undo the giant with his whetted hacker. Thus it seems that the mind that forces the environment to respond in multiple movements is similar to the mind that with multiple movements forces the environment to respond. Either way, these strategies of diversifying either self or external world are the very same strategies as those used by lyric sequence. In a sequence such as "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," Stevens shows his investment in transforming language, tone, sensory spheres, and rhythms, applying pressure against anything that manifests objective rigidity, in order that the real can be "Splashed wide-wise" (359), splayed out, "Its wings spread wide" (136).

In "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," this intent manifests itself first in the smallest but most immediate of ways: within three lines, Stevens starts to experiment with the means by which the Ariel-like mind can achieve purchase—can effect sea change. By the end of the first tercet, the poet begins to reconfigure the travelogue, to shift its tone, through the introduction of the poem's first unabashedly aesthetic word, "hued." "Hued" calls attention to itself, for it belongs neither to the genre of chronicle, nor even to its own grammatical conventions; normally a noun, it is very odd in verb form. It bristles—daintily. At the same time, there is something of the fa-

miliar about it. "Tehuantepec"—the most vivid, colorful word in the poem so far, and yet the word that most clearly alludes to the world in its rigid, objective state—has resurfaced in the poem's third line: "And in the morning summer hued the deck" (82). Although only a particle of its former self, "Tehuantepec" may be recognized in the breathy sound of "hued" and in its exotic, bristling beauty.

The hint that the words are related is subtly transmitted through rhyme and accent ("Tehuantepec" / "hued the deck"), yet this miniature linguistic transformation from actual, map-able terrain to active, aesthetic event ("hued," after all, is a verb) is not insignificant. For a poem like "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" to be imagined, the world must be challenged by the aesthetic realm; it must be distilled, reconfigured, and at times even rendered unrecognizable. Over a decade later, in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," Stevens would recklessly celebrate poetry's sometimes violent skewering and splaying of reality:

Ah, but to play man number one,
To drive the dagger in his heart,

To lay his brain upon the board
And pick the acrid colors out,

To nail his thought across the door,
Its wings spread wide to rain and snow,

To strike his living hi and ho,
To tick it, tock it, turn it true,

To bang it from a savage blue,
Jangling the metal of the strings . . . (135–36)

Not waiting until the third canto as the speaker did in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," the poet of "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" puts the world, manifested as "Tehuantepec," "upon the board" (that is, on board the chopping block of ship deck). By the end of his first tercet, he has "pick[ed] . . . out" from within Tehuantepec its scarcely "acrid" color, its matinal hue.

"[H]ued" rings true to Stevens' idiom, an idiom that is at times joyfully and mischievously full of hoots, Hoons, hoobla-hows, and hoo-hooings,⁶ the latter of which appears in the second lyric of the poem. The verb announces itself as a personal intrusion, rather than a philosophical one. By means of this idiomatic self-reference, as well as by the linguistic hewing of Tehuantepec, the visual hueing of seascape, and perhaps the physical undertone of "hued"-as-lyric-exhalation, Stevens suggests that even minutiae can create sequence, even the movement "from finikin to fine

finikin" (416) can, and must, confront the vastness and the complexity of the natural world.

The unfolding of "hued" from within "Tehuantepec" might seem a vague phenomenon, barely audible, were it not for other aural unfoldings like it within the same lyric. These become more overt as the poem's "vif" begins to make its presence felt (through linguistic revision, through polychromatic infusion) within the opening lyric of the sequence. The second tercet is clearly under the influence of an imaginative presence, one so dominant that the outside world for a moment falls away. After morning has hued the deck with its warm sunlight, associations (framed in the impersonal—"made *one* think"—but drawn from a distinctly idiosyncratic frame of reference) begin to accrue paratactically, and the sentence spills over the circumscription of stanza:

And in the morning summer hued the deck

And made one think of rosy chocolate
And gilt umbrellas. (82)

When considering "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," often its most inexplicable moment seems to be this very one (and likewise, its variations within the sequence as a whole). Why does the lyric digress so quickly into what appears to be merely eccentric association? Why does the imagination choose this moment to retreat into a mode of urbane luxuries, luxuries that seem to create a soothing cushion between the ship's passenger and his still, salty, glittering environs? This space that opens within the lyric causes disorientation because it is so overtly human, so tenaciously domestic, in relation to its aquatic surroundings.⁷ Is this the way for the imagination to take hold of the world? Is the poem *surrendering* by venturing indoors?

Another cause of disorientation here arises from the fact that hot chocolate and umbrellas are hardly intimate, meaningful, transcendent, Whitmanian emblems. Such associative images seem blissfully dismissive of what lyric, as an art of interiority, aspires to be. Even read as a kind of baroque shorthand in which "chocolate" and "umbrellas" stand for "food" and "shelter" (the critical offerings of the domos), the images seem to rest within the realm of the trivial, or even the banal. Eschewing the role of poet as visionary, Stevens instead offers glimpses of indefinites, of the anticlimactic personal realm, of the superbly superfluous desires of the mind's eye. Nevertheless, in parallel to the transcendent realm that they fail to live up to, these personal images also intimate desires and pleasures out of reach. The critical distinction between Stevens and Whitman becomes clear when we see that Stevens' images are only *just* out of reach. Their "until" is only a playful thought or two away: what does "rosy" chocolate taste like? Where might "gilt" umbrellas (*en masse*, no less) be

found? One could imagine dainty umbrellas in rose tones or gold-flecked mugs of chocolate. The reverse is far more appealing, because just beyond experience, just curious enough to warrant a near-equal attentional balance between chromatic adjective and object. The combination of gilt with the sobriety of the shadowy umber of the umbrellas and likewise the rosy freshness with the dense flavor of cocoa—certainly these are matches made in sensualist heaven.

All this could quickly become cloying enough, but the poet does not allow the lyric to wander into surrealism. As always with Stevens, it is important to distrust the appearance of urbane frivolity. The elements that lyric explicitly makes inapposite to its external world (that is, the tiny gesture poised against the vast giant; the insertion of the chromatic in a travelogue; the eccentric creature comforts dreamed of by a ship-deck observer) also seem to be Stevens' preferred tools to crease and crinkle, in ever so small a way, the smooth, "piano-polished" surface of the real.⁸ Once the surface has been creased by the personal, the inapposite rose and gilt quickly dissipate; it soon becomes clear, through one other small-scale transfiguration, that the imagination has been enfolded in the sea surface, rendering that surface ever more "full" and not merely full of clouds. Only one tercet later, "rosy chocolate" is shown to have been transfused into the external "real." Its color and sound and flavors (previously thought frivolous, superfluous) reemerge, reconfigured as "that ambrosial latitude" (83). The lyric's geography is shown to have actually expanded, "Its wings spread wide."

It seems that the method of making creases within the real—whereby the seemingly frivolous element ("the civilest odors / . . . of geraniums and unsmelled flowers" [5]; "rosy chocolate" [82]) briefly corrects the rigidity of the objective world—is the very stuff of sequence, counterintuitive as that may be, given that expansion and creases are not always logical partners. Nevertheless, Stevens' sequence here, and elsewhere, is generated through these transient moments of conceptual contact between inner and outer worlds, via the crease, the fold, that joins the two; through this contact, a wonderful kind of structural momentum is generated. We notice this in the aesthetic *whoosh* of "hued" that spills over across stanzas, or, as we see here, the way in which lyric geography develops a latitude, a measurable breadth.

To transfigure the geographic into the aesthetic realm is of course an expected strategy in a poem such as "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," although to do so on the level of linguistic "crinkling" is less expected, and all the more enjoyable because of the scarcely noticeable presences of earlier sounds, traces of words. But to make a transfiguration once again within just a few lines, this time releasing the aesthetic back into the geographic *and* using the same kind of "find the hidden sound" strategy—this act is not expected, and suggests that the outcome of these transfigurations is

not so central to "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" as it is to many of the anti-theoretical cantos of power struggle in "The Man with the Blue Guitar."⁹

The best way to think about this set of chiasmic transitions (from outer world to inner world and inner world to outer world) is to remember the importance that Stevens gives to multiplicity of outcome. A final resolution between inner and outer is impossible; when a perfect balance between the two is proposed, the poetry becomes self-consciously dull; momentum fades and the poem begins to repeat itself. In this first lyric of "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," Stevens offers a last and terribly unsubtle aural juxtaposition, laying side by side the geographic term "Pacific" with its etymological synonym. Friction or any kind of struggling can hardly be said to characterize the following lines:

Who, then, evolved the sea-blooms from the clouds
Diffusing balm in that Pacific calm?
C'était mon enfant, mon bijou, mon âme.

The sea-clouds whitened far below the calm. . . . (83)

It is the only moment in the entire sequence in which a triple rhyme occurs (or even a quadruple rhyme if the internally rhyming "balm" is included). That this over-the-top rhyme occurs both within English question and French answer, as well as across the bounds of stanza, that it occurs just as the poet is asking who has devised the images of the poem's own self-reflective and reiterative imagism, and that it occurs in an almost catatonically serene semantic pattern (balm/calm/*âme*/calm): all these direct indications suggest that the first lyric has completed its individual expression of the sequence's dizzle-dazzle and that it has established the rhythm by which it will vary itself.¹⁰ Such a moment of repose after radical reconfiguration is not unprecedented in poems of Stevens that actually *begin* large-scale sequences. It appears as the end of "Earthy Anecdote," the very first poem of *Harmonium*, a volume he in fact thought of as a single poem:

Later, the firecat closed his bright eyes
And slept. (3)

To speak about the means by which sequence becomes possible is an abstract and often difficult task. Yet in "Three Academic Pieces," Stevens brings the issue to its most fundamental level, writing of the transition between indoors and outdoors, writing of the perceptual expansion effected by relocation. In so doing, he suggests why an undulating sea sequence might very well be expanded by an interruption, a significant crease, in each of five parts, imagining sweet drinks and collapsible forms that offer shelter from the weather. Though this interruption has already

been discussed in part, with respect to the poem's imaginative transfigurations, it has not been discussed with respect to larger elements of Stevens' structural poetics. His following remarks show the kind of imaginative possibility made available to the poet by the enfolding together, for just a moment, of inner and outer environments:

It is as if a man who lived indoors should go outdoors on a day of sympathetic weather. His realization of the weather would exceed that of a man who lives outdoors. It might, in fact, be intense enough to convert the real world about him into an imagined world. In short, a sense of reality keen enough to be in excess of the normal sense of reality creates a reality of its own. . . . If the savor of life is the savor of reality, the fact will establish itself whichever way one approaches it. (691)

Intensity of perception, for Stevens, is a function of environmental change. One might therefore suggest that as distinct from balmy seascape as the cossetting luxuries of hot beverages and rain-protecting shelters are, or as distinct as other kinds of private comforts might be from what the poet perceives as the objective, external, space of "the real," such images, as variations of the lyric's dominant plane, have the potential to offer a very specific kind of imaginative energy.

In *Ariel and the Police*, Frank Lentricchia draws attention to a statement Stevens makes in an early journal entry ("It is a great pleasure to seize an impression and lock it up in words: you feel as if you had it safe forever" [L 33]) in order to suggest that the poet's navigations from exterior to interior spaces may have as their agenda the enervating, the taming, of the out-of-doors world. With disapproval, the critic describes what he sees as a craven pattern of retreat and enclosure: "The aesthetic for Stevens is a lyric process of making interior, from the *real* space of the streets of New York to the *private* space of his room and then into the *psychic* space of consciousness (perilously sealed now to the outside) where pastoral experience can be made safe. In his room, . . . the pastoral can be had any time, any place" (152; emphasis added). The difficulty, here, lies in the unpersuasive claim that Stevens' poesis is best understood as charting a "living room or bust" kind of unidirectional itinerary; and in the uncritical way in which Lentricchia guards the divisions between "real" on the one hand, and "private" and "psychic" on the other, divisions that Stevens at no point imagines are possible to maintain ("you feel *as if* you had it safe forever"), if they even should exist at all. For the poet emphasizes time and time again that categories such as "inside" and "outside," "real" and "private" are variations of each other that the imagination must pass "within or beneath," by a motion "to and fro." As Stevens says in "Two or Three Ideas," "There is inherent in the words *the revelation of reality* a suggestion that there is a reality of or within or beneath the surface of reality.

There are many such realities through which poets constantly pass to and fro, without noticing the imaginary lines that divide one from the other" (848).

It seems clear, therefore, that hermetic escape is not the end toward which the poet of "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" invites the imagination "indoors," as it were—invites the imagination to indulge in luxurious creature comforts. Nor indeed are the imagination's ornate creations valued solely for their own deliciousness (or else the poetry would be gaudy and lifeless), or as reclusive eccentricities (or else the poetry would not be compelling). Rather, Stevens evokes such images precisely because the shock of contrast they instigate is capable of provoking "a sense of reality keen enough to be in excess of the normal sense of reality," a sense no less real for its keenness or its excess. Sequence becomes a function of such an intensified multiplicity of vision.

The poet's interior imagination, then—here, his domestic imagery, his references to the gourmet's appetite—does not hasten retreat, but on the contrary fosters access to the seemingly slick topography of the real. Not only can the aesthetic *word* ("hued") extracted from the objective word ("Tehuantepec") offer access to the real, but so too can the domestic *objet* (the warm morning beverage, or the temporary shelter) removed from the seascape's immense panorama offer some kind of paradoxical access, some kind of energy in reserve through which he gains purchase on that which is physically just beyond reach, just beyond the bounds of familiar territory. Such contact often appears as regression into an idiosyncratic space of the mind. Yet how these lyric moments resound with Stevens' idiom and predilections, those of a man who waited eagerly to receive packed persimmons in the mail, who repeatedly requested teas, "milk punch and . . . jaggery" from Ceylon, and who, in thanking the sender of these gifts, a Mr. Van Geysel, on December 31, 1937, remembered to note particularly that since Christmas morning "The living room has been full of the odor of the fans" (L 328).

In complement with the linguistic transfigurations seen in the first lyric of "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," these "living room[s]" of lyric are not spaces in which Stevens ever dawdles self-indulgently; their effect in fact depends upon the very transience of their presence within any lyric in which they appear. They are not the stuff of lyric *per se*: rather they are the sensual stimulants of the imagination. Their interiority, their domesticity, announce therefore that something else, something beyond the reaches of sensory experience, is about to be broached. Stevens' originally "rosy" chocolate, which changes throughout the sequence to "chop-house," "porcelain," "musky," and "Chinese" chocolate, as if being delivered from different locations by the various Mr. Van Geysels of the imagination, is a means to a kind of imaginative purchase on the real, a purchase that results in a desire to create sequence and a crampon-like capacity to pierce and perforate the slick surface of the natural world. One finds similar strat-

egies in the lyric sequence "Sunday Morning," which opens with its "Complacencies of the peignoir, and late / Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair" (53), although the lyric itself has little to do with complacency or Manet-esque oranges. Here the evocation of a luxurious domesticity exists in order to generate an unusual sensitivity of perception. When the poet steps outside the opulence of his breakfast imagery, he suddenly is able to summon an unearthly mode, previously unthinkable, as he prophetically chants, "Death is the mother of beauty" (55). It seems the domestic interior is the place to sound a few practice notes in a favorite key before restarting the requiem, or beginning any audacious foray into the wild.

These practice notes are strangely compelling in and of themselves. No one who has ever read the phrase "concupiscent curds" (50) can forget the way in which "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" engages a domestic vocabulary of tobacco, ice cream, kitchen cups, and newspaper-wrapped bouquets in the service of a face-to-face encounter with death's detritus of worn feet, furniture, and bedding. The first stanza's thudding heaviness of "big cigars" and ironic elegance of "concupiscent curds," joined together in the domestic sphere, might remind us of the way in which "gilt umbrellas" combined airy lightness and shadowy smoke in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds": the images are again just beyond reach, just out of sight, just tingling enough to ask for a closer look. Stevens' intimate yet starkly impersonal view of death in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" is a view rarely achieved by elegy in such a blunt efficiency of two muscular stanzas; that it is a view preceded by unapologetically appetite-infused language, just as coffee and oranges opened the sequential treatment of mortality in "Sunday Morning," suggests that the interior, for Stevens, is in no way a place of poetic quiescence. Rather, it is a place in which perception is contracted, concentrated, stimulated, and activated, in preparation for a projection into that which it has not directly experienced before.

Stevens is not a poet who often allows the lyric self an opportunity to speak in the first person. It is a startling realization that the "interior" of his poetic self is often figural, experienced as an architecture of the interior, or as an appetite that must come from a desiring self but that exists only in images of ice cream, hot chocolate, and other sweetnesses, rather than through the exposed lyric "I." This sort of "interior," however, is central to his poetics and should not be tolerated regretfully, but rather peered into and explored. For Stevens, self cannot exist for very long outside of environment: "One is not duchess / A hundred yards from a carriage" (70). Nor can environment exist outside of self. In relying upon the finicky minutiae of sequence, or upon his imaginative interiors, Stevens seems to invite paradox: far from indicating alienation from reality, these dependencies reveal the poet as actively creasing and enfolding the self, the interior, into the topography of the external. That these creases do not result in poetic abbreviation but rather in a powerful expansion of lyric terrain,

often into a sequence structure, might create a kind of intellectual impasse (in the sense that material creases, such as those in a crumpled sheet of paper, tend to reduce the apparent surface area) were it not that Stevens himself ever so quietly and subtly suggests the means by which such an impasse may be overcome.

When Stevens pleats the interior, aesthetic self within his "machine / Of ocean" (82–83), the effect upon "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," as we have seen, is a lyric unfolding. What then of final form? What then, when the poem stops opening, as it inevitably must? What kind of structure has emerged from all these pleats? Is it shapeless or does it have form? The metaphor of a "pleating motion" that joins self and exterior is useful, but is it merely a lyric method, or can it be thought of as itself a lyric structure? At the time that Stevens compared his earliest work ("my trifling poesies") to "the trifling designs one sees on fans" (L 171) in a letter to Elsie in 1911, he had not yet emerged as a poet in his own right; he had not yet shifted his instinct for a fan-painter poetic to a fan poetic, proper. I suggest that the figure of the fan as dynamic object and as a lyric structure is a crucial trope for Stevens, one that is repeatedly theorized in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds."

The first line of the poem, the first line of the sequence in its entirety—"In that November off Tehuantepec"—serves, one notes, as the first line for all five isometric parts. It is the only line in the sequence that remains constant. This word-for-word reiteration fuses the lyrics together geographically, temporally, and structurally: when they diverge, the divergence can be shown to be from a common root. In "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," Stevens uses a similar technique, creating constancy amid highest contrast between the rooms of living and dead, when the final line of each stanza declares, "The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream" (50). Unlike the strong impression of a radial, fan-like structure that a five-part repeated first line suggests, the use of a refrain, a repeated end line or lines, does not immediately suggest a fan structure. Yet for Stevens, the trope of the fan is not a lightweight device, a singular allegorical vehicle. It is as multiple as his bridges, anchors, and threads. It can be used as gently, as firmly—or as ironically—as needed. In "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," the fan as structure is subtly present in the form of refrain, but is more distinctly urged with respect to theme. Just as the imagination implicates itself into the real sea in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," crease upon crease, so too in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" is the imagination's instinct embedded, or rather embroidered, onto the elegiac shroud, "that sheet / On which she embroidered fantails once" (50). The sheet, embroidered with a motif of fantail pigeons, a motif of the fan as animate, fluctuating form, is to be draped as ironic, unfit shroud across the dead woman's face.¹¹ As such, the folds and pleats of the drape, and the folds of the fan-like tails of the embroidered birds, may not be quite broad enough to cover "her horny feet"; the extent of the fantails' decorative possibilities is not structurally

sufficient here to conceal the dead, to conceal the thematic edifice of the stanza. Rather, the fantails reveal the blunt physicality of death; they allow the feet to emerge, "To show how cold she is, and dumb" (50).

The fantails of Stevensian lyric invariably serve a metapoetic function. In "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," they refer faintly to the kind of structure upon which the lyric is founded, to the way in which the concrete minutiae of the imagination tend to spread open and outward across the bareness of the real, no matter how bare, at times exposing only its feet, its coldness, its mute solidity. In genres other than elegy—that is, in a poem such as "Sea Surface Full of Clouds"—the fan has a more buoyant, extensive effect, the kind created by the Christmas-time odor of Ceylon-imported sandalwood fans in Stevens' living room: the lasting, sequential impression of foreignness creased and infused—yet never "locked"—within the domestic.

When Stevens reviewed Marianne Moore's *Selected Poems* in 1935, he commented upon Moore's "The Fish" (a poem that, like "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," explores "the perplexed machine / Of ocean") before addressing any other poem in the volume. His comments are instructive with respect to his interest in the fan as a structural poetic:

Miss Moore's is an unaffected, witty, colloquial sort of spirit. In *The Fish*, for instance, the lines move with the rhythm of sea-fans waving to and fro under water. They are lines of exquisite propriety. Yet in this poem she uses what appears, aesthetically, to be most inapposite language.

"All
external
marks of abuse are present on this
defiant edifice—
all the physical features of."

Everywhere in the book there is this enhancing diversity. In consequence, one has more often than not a sense of invigoration not usually communicated by the merely fastidious. (774)

Stevens here suggests that the imagination's idiosyncratic engagement with the real, that "defiant edifice," can itself be imagined. Though "The Fish" contains an image of an "injured / fan," it is not this thematic fan to which Stevens turns. Rather, the *structural* variation and movement of Moore's lines of "exquisite propriety" prompt the reviewer's semi-imposed, semi-extracted metaphor of sea fans. Like the dangling motion that characterizes the bird's feathers in one of Stevens' last poems, "Of Mere Being" ("The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down" [477]), sea-fan lines, sea-fan poetry, wave with a rhythm of "to and fro under water" only if there is a structural solidity at base. This solidity is, for Stevens, the space of the

natural world, the tractable space for his own imagination, upon which he impresses his own sensual, elaborate, variational beauty. The fan poetics of the Stevensian lyric sequence is one that offers us a delicacy of poesis that is unexpectedly predicated upon a “defiant” commitment to grasp, to engage with, and to expand the shifting, unfamiliar foundations of lyric territory, lyric shore.

An extended exploration of Stevens’ sequences, such as “The Auroras of Autumn” and “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” could show to what lengths the poet could go in pleating the world into his sequences of meditation. Unlike “Sea Surface Full of Clouds,” the longer sequences refuse the predictability of a relatively inflexible armature. In them Stevens allows the traversing, enfolding motions of thought to explore more ambitious confluences of self and world:

It is not in the premise that reality
Is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses
A dust, a force that traverses a shade. (417)

These mature sequences show Stevens moving beyond the thin shadow-circles of gilded umbrellas, amid deeper penumbras.

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Notes

¹ Wallace Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 82. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with page number only in parentheses.

² By preferring to articulate the power of fishing lights over that of anchors, Stevens chooses an image of temporary power. For unlike anchors, fishing lights are effective only during the nighttime; they will cease to have any kind of “mastering, arranging” skill over the sea when the sun rises. See “A Rabbit as King of the Ghosts” (190), for a similar kind of emphasis placed by Stevens upon nocturnal (and therefore transient) creative strength.

³ Note that the structural implication of such a “becoming” can be felt not as teleological, but rather as recursively perceptual.

⁴ See George S. Lensing, “Mrs. Wallace Stevens’ *Sea Voyage* and ‘Sea Surface Full of Clouds.’ ”

⁵ The technique is a familiar one, used in traditional verse narratives such as Clement Moore’s “A Visit from St. Nicholas”: “ ’Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house, / Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse. . . . ”

⁶ The repeated rhyme in the sequence between “hue” and “blue” suggests that Stevens did not differentiate significantly between the sound of “hue” and “hoo” (or, indeed “who”); moreover, “Sea Surface Full of Clouds” is clearly interested in heightening the experience of rhyme through visual surprise (“blue” / “hoo” / “two” / “who,” etc.).

⁷ A point of interest here with respect to my claim that these images cause disorientation is the choice of the word “umbrellas”: Stevens seems to have made a functional and tonal distinction between “umbrellas” and “parasols,” and “umbrellas” is a word

that I argue is at odds with seascape. See one of his first published poems, "The Ballade of the Pink Parasol," which appeared in the May 1900 edition of *The Harvard Advocate* (496). Throughout the poet's work, "parasol" stays close to its etymological origin, striking a major key, used largely in sunny, mild contexts: "Peter Parasol" ("I wish they were all fair, / And walked in fine clothes, / With parasols, in the afternoon air" [548]); "The Comedian as the Letter C" ("the sun / Was not the sun because it never shone / With bland complaisance on pale parasols" [23]); "Certain Phenomena of Sound" ("opened wide / A parasol, which I had found, / Against the sun" [256]); "Of Hartford in a Purple Light" ("What is this purple, this parasol, / This stage-light of the Opera?" [208]). By contrast, Stevens rarely uses "umbrellas," but when he does, it is often in contexts of inclement weather, as a word that summons up a minor key, perhaps by means of its root of "umber": "Let purple Phoebus lie in umber harvest, / Let Phoebus slumber and die in autumn umber" ("Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" [329]); "the shadows of the trees / Are like wrecked umbrellas" ("The Green Plant" [430]). Note that "Tea" seems to mark an exception to this usage, though the poem's frame of reference is an autumnal, shivering and shriveling landscape. This is all to say that though Stevens' use of "umbrellas" in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" may be simply a function of its aural sympathy with the word "November," I suggest that the blustery, rainy-day connotations of the word "umbrellas," as opposed to *para-sols*, serve to discourage the notion that these objects are accessories of a local landscape and rather serve to reinforce the sense that the umbrellas in question originate from "some place else," some place native not to Tehuantepec but to Stevens himself.

⁸Kay Harel, in "Again Is an Oxymoron: William James's Ideas on Repetition and Wallace Stevens' 'Sea Surface Full of Clouds,'" sees the poem (and its reader) as "stuck on the surface," noting that "We are witness only to the external, to [the poet's] varying surfaces" (5); "Giving no personal information in the poem, Stevens never allows us to go deeper into his 'realities,' whatever they may be, indicated by the changing sensations, changing perceptions, changing objects. . . . We are *stuck* in the sensory, on the surface" (7; emphasis added). On this question of the poem's depths, dimensions, and textures, therefore, Harel and I differ, for I suggest that not only does Stevens incorporate a private subjectivity into the external landscape of "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," but also that the inspired evocation of the personal, the domestic element, is the very catalyst by which his sequence achieves its fullness, its "agains."

⁹In Bonnie Costello's clarifying 2003 book, *Shifting Ground: Reinventing Landscape in Modern American Poetry*, she notes the importance for Stevens of continually revising his own imaginative comprehension of, and contact with, the natural world: "In surrendering the centered prospect of Claude (the world seen through arches) and the placid organic harmonies of Constable, Stevens resisted the alternative rhetoric of immersion that could grant natural authority to the poet's vision, the rhetoric that began to evolve in the nineteenth century with Martin Johnson Heade and emerged in the work of John Marin and Georgia O'Keeffe. In turning from Miltonic and Wordsworthian patterns he did not take the route of William Carlos Williams, aiming for 'contact with the thing and nothing but the thing.' For Stevens such sinking into place usually leads to a sense of panic in which signification and aesthetic order break down, in which he is washed away by magnitude" (66).

¹⁰The absence of struggle here is in marked contrast with the earlier imaginative energy of the poet's idiosyncratic associations; in a letter to a young scholar, Stevens describes the imagery's energy as integrally discordant, an "embryo of charivari": "Then about Chinese chocolate: It may be that this is what may be called an embryo for charivari. The words are used in a purely expressive sense and are meant to connote a big Chinese with a very small cup of chocolate: something incongruous" (L 389). In addition to the friction between adjective and noun (Chinese vs. chocolate), I

suggest that within the poem as a whole the imagery of chocolate and umbrellas functions itself as “an embryo of charivari,” helping Stevens “To bang” his sequence “from a savage blue, / Jangling the metal of the strings” (136); the conceptual “noise” creates a clatter and a clamor that pushes lyric consciousness into ocean, across sequence.

¹¹ In a 1939 letter to Henry Church, regarding a translation into French of “The Emperor of Ice-Cream,” Stevens clarifies that the term “fantails” is metonymic (*L* 387).

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Masculine Fecundity and “Overinclusiveness”: Imagery of Pregnancy in Wallace Stevens’ Poetry

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IN HER INFLUENTIAL 1995 book, *Like Subjects, Love Objects*, Jessica Benjamin articulates a concept of “overinclusiveness.” It is not at first look the most appealing term for talking about the poetry of Wallace Stevens, who in his later work sought a “supreme fiction” yet made little effort to bring a diversity of voices into his poems. Stevens is a vulnerable poet in this respect. Mark Halladay’s 1991 *Stevens and the Interpersonal* has fleshed out a sense of Stevens’ world as without compassion and therefore emotionally stunted, and this has become a familiar criticism. Benjamin’s idea, however, can help us to read Stevens’ poetry as carrying out a process in which imaginative exploration leads to emotional maturation. Central to this way of reading Stevens is the idea that fantasizing is not always and only a flight from reality. Elaborating specific imaginative scenarios can lead to increased self-knowledge, which can in turn catalyze psychological change.

Considering the prevalence in clinical cases of frustrated longing for a measure of supremacy in daily life, Benjamin points toward self-conscious fantasizing as a route to growth:

[I]f we cannot expect to eradicate the deep, unconscious sediment of the omnipotence fantasy in our psychic and cultural life, it might be good enough to know how we might mitigate its most dire forms: by taking that fantasy back into the self, owning our capacity to create a realm of the ideal. . . . [F]antasy can become the medium of the self at play. (113)

Considered as a medium, fantasy is a space where one can re-create, where one can be changed for the better by what one finds in play. In this context, what Benjamin calls the “transitional use of overinclusiveness” (127) means that one experiences in fantasy a capacity one does not actually have, an experience that is beneficial because it allows one to tolerate consciously a frustrated wish and, so, in some cases, to move toward a resolution of that wish. Benjamin describes a number of overinclusive fantasies, all of them originating in the “preoedipal” phase of childhood, when is-

sues of identification with and separation from the mother or mother figure take place. For males, however, overinclusive fantasy does take a specific characteristic form: "the capacity to bear a baby" (63). Drawing on the work of Irene Fast, in particular her 1984 *Gender Identity*, as well as her own clinical experience, Benjamin claims that men can be led to an increasingly realistic—and less narcissistically frustrated—sense of self by revisiting in fantasy the "pregnancy envy" of the preoedipal phase.¹

If we read poetry written across forty years in Wallace Stevens' body of work as "the medium of the self at play," its increasingly playful overinclusive elements can be seen as signs of Stevens' growing capacity to tolerate ambiguity and envy. Joan Richardson's biography of Stevens has discussed some of this material, focusing on the links among his personal life, his habitual defenses against emotion, and his poetry. I would like to approach the psychological dimensions of Stevens' work in a somewhat different way. Changes in his use of imagery of pregnancy show us something about a development in Stevens' inner life. In particular, the images of his later poems show a diminishment of his earlier tendency to associate birth with death, a sign of his increasing tolerance of the envious desire to be pregnant. This essay describes this process of development, contrasting *Harmonium* and later poems written with the idea of celebrating an enlarged and fecund male figure, arguing that as Stevens becomes overinclusive in his gender identifications he also works free of a tendency to associate birth and death.²

THE BIRTH-DEATH IMAGE COMPLEX IN *HARMONIUM*

Perhaps the most famous pronouncement in Stevens' first book, the 1923 *Harmonium*, comes in the poem "Sunday Morning": "Death is the mother of beauty."³ The memorable quality of this epigram comes in part from the way it makes two concise observations about beauty: that it is intensified by finitude, and that it emerges from an obscure and threatening source. Its metaphor of death as a mother takes on another shade of meaning, however, in the context of images of motherhood in Stevens' early poems. Figural language in "The Worms at Heaven's Gate," as well as "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," "The Comedian as the Letter C," and "Nomad Exquisite" from *Harmonium*, repeatedly associate pregnancy and birth with corruption and death. It is an imaginative mechanism of the work.

The same connection is made in the Hindu notion of *Samsara*, the web of life and death, and it is also expressed, as Michele Lise Tarter suggests, in the curse of painful childbirth in the first book of the *Tanakh* (20). In *Harmonium*, Stevens has a particular way of coloring this longstanding and transcultural association, however. He emphatically imagines a corruption inherent in the fertile figure. Death dwells in the body that gives birth. In this respect, the pregnancy images of *Harmonium* are not only tropes on the enduring *topos* of birth-and-death but are also dynamized

by Stevens' attitudes toward maternal bodies. In *Harmonium*, beauty escapes from a deadly mother.

"The Worms at Heaven's Gate" offers a pronounced instance of this tendency. In the poem the body of Badroulbador, the princess in *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night* whom Aladdin marries with the help of genii released from his lamp, is carried out of the tomb by worms whose gradual devouring of the corpse Stevens portrays as a re-assembling of her:

Out of the tomb, we bring Badroulbador,
Within our bellies, we her chariot.
Here is an eye. And here are, one by one,
The lashes of that eye and its white lid.
Here is the cheek on which that lid declined,
And, finger after finger, here, the hand,
The genius of that cheek. Here are the lips,
The bundle of the body and the feet.
.....
Out of the tomb we bring Badroulbador. (40)

This poem plays out the most concrete consequences for saying that death is the mother of beauty, for it expresses both celebratory and denigratory attitudes towards this thesis. On the one hand, the labor of the worms turns the process of decomposition into the material of a *blazon*, a praise poem listing the features of the beloved. The worms save Badroulbador from decay and from the grave itself, and they translate her into a beautiful presentation, a saving carrying-over emphasized in the last line's reprise of the first. On the other hand, the worms chariot her to heaven in their bellies, a process that condenses womb and digestive tract. The combination of methodological precision ("here, . . . one by one," "finger after finger") and spontaneous, unorthodox ordering of the parts (eye, lashes individually, cheek, hand, then lips, body, feet) suggests a delivery of Badroulbador that is part birth and part elimination. The worms are corrupt wombs themselves and also figures for the corruption in the tomb-womb birthing Badroulbador into heaven.

The eighth section of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," a poem largely concerned with the less sanguine, more reflective pleasures of life after forty, displays at its end another intense and decadent metaphor of fecundity:

Like a dull scholar, I behold, in love,
An ancient aspect touching a new mind.
It comes, it blooms, it bears its fruit and dies.
This trivial trope reveals a way of truth.
Our bloom is gone. We are the fruit thereof.
Two golden gourds distended on our vines,

We hang like warty squashes, streaked and rayed,
Into the autumn weather, splashed with frost,
Distorted by hale fatness, turned grotesque.
The laughing sky will see the two of us
Washed into rinds by rotting winter rains. (13)

Stevens asserts the "truth" of his birth-death "trope" in the first half of the stanza, and he closes with a prophecy of the sky's cold mirth in the face of this decay. But the weight of the stanza lies in its middle, with its "distended," "Distorted" gourds. They match each other in their "grotesque" fullness. The distention, the disfigurement, the marking, the subjection to time, to winter and rain—these must happen to the two gourds together. The dyad has been handed over to a "fatness" that corrupts. Indeed, the note of decay enters only as the fecund "it" of the poem gives way to the over-ripe "we."

Fecundity itself is what has betrayed two that were blossoms, and so poisoned their relation. If the poem, like "Sunday Morning," makes an allusion to "To Autumn" in closing with a mention of the sky, it figures autumn differently, not as a voluptuary drowsing and watching the ooze of cider but as an ice queen, splashing frost and bringing warts. The characterization is motivated by envy and fear. It is possible to read these two unfortunate gourds as marking too the failure of Stevens' pursuit of an alternate figure of generation, his inability to imagine testicles as counterparts to the womb. In any event they have grown too big with fruit out of what Stevens calls elsewhere the "venereal soil" (38).

It is in the long poem "The Comedian as the Letter C" that Stevens most consistently imagines the earth as rank with generation, expanding his tendency to make dark etymological puns on the name Florida into a broader attitude of denigration toward (mother) nature. Harold Bloom concurs with Helen Vendler that Stevens acknowledges in the poem that his instinct for admiration runs to the "austerities" and "dilapidations" of nature rather than to its "fertility," and that Crispin, the character of the poem, represents a Stevens "who is repelled as the provocations of the senses reach excess" (76). The language of the poem is ceaselessly excessive, with a hyper decadence that critics alternately see as mocking or mirroring the intensity of Crispin's journey from Bordeaux to the Yucatan to Havana and then the Carolinas. If Crispin learns anything from all this motion, it is demonstrated in the shift from the postulate that "man is the intelligence of his soil" at the start of the poem to the contrasting claim that "his soil is man's intelligence" (22, 29) at the start of the fourth section. The freedom of the mental from the earthy becomes more skeptically seen as the poem goes on. The intelligence becomes soiled.

Against the background of this inclination away from unambiguous celebration of fertility, the poem's images of natural generation tend to seem repellent. In the poem's second section, for instance, surrounded by

"Green barbarism turning paradigm," the journeyer in the Yucatan surrenders to the influence of his soil this way:

Crispin foresaw a curious promenade
Or, nobler, sensed an elemental fate,
And elemental potencies and pangs,
And beautiful barenesses as yet unseen,
Making the most of savagery of palms,
Of moonlight on the thick, cadaverous bloom
That yuccas breed, and of the panther's tread. (25)

Crispin ironically makes the most of the profuse vegetative (and animal) life around him by an imaginative reduction, winnowing down from the variety of a "promenade" to an "elemental fate" and then from that singular fate to a "beautiful bareness as yet unseen." The "pangs" of this bareness will be the opposite of the pangs of birth, for they will reduce rather than multiply. Surrounded by fecundity, Crispin longs to unmake it. To do this he relies on, in Stevens' accurate word, "savagery"—not only of the palms but of the panthers and, fittingly, of the "cadaverous bloom" the yucca bears at the end of its life, a death-bred flower. The round moon and the dying yucca conspire to hold one flower up and out from the savage forest. In both the literal figure of the yucca and the symbolic one of the moon, the mother of beauty is dead.

Bloom notes the likeness between "The Comedian as the Letter C" and another of Stevens' more vegetal poems, "Nomad Exquisite," lamenting the change at the end of the poem from an earlier version's "So, in me, come flinging / Fruits, forms, flowers, flakes and fountains" to the final version's "Forms, flames, and the flakes of flames" (Bloom 86). His telling point in associating the two poems is that Stevens aspires to a version of the procreative power that frightens him, a power he is willing to imaginatively appropriate in *Harmonium* only if it is linked to decay. In "Nomad Exquisite," the speaker flings "Forms, flames, and the flakes of flames" (77), the last of which, presumably ashes, signify the unmaking of the flung forms. This too bears the marks of envy in its mechanical undoing of what has been created.

If one will agree, on the basis of these examples, that *Harmonium* links birth and death in a mechanical way, it is appropriate to ask why this might be so, particularly as this tendency diminishes in Stevens' later work. In an analysis of images of pregnancy in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, Mary Thomas Crane relies on theories of cognitive psychology to argue that the play demonstrates how the human mind experiences itself as subject to the body, and to an extent inevitably contaminated by it. Characters' use of figures of the body demonstrate, in their recurrent depiction of corruption, "the inevitable vulnerability and contamination that are the conditions of human selfhood, productivity, and exchange" (292). In par-

ticular, Crane notes that “male characters attempt (and fail) to formulate a concept of pregnancy that retains its productivity and plenitude but avoids contamination” (282). Crane’s approach to the play offers one way to talk about the similar tendency to associate pregnancy and contamination in Stevens’ early work. But Crane does not explain why pregnancy of all bodily states takes on the importance that it does, and her approach leaves little room to explain why the birth-death image complex diminishes in Stevens’ later work. Rather than accept the birth-death complex as biologically necessary, it seems to me more responsive to view “The Worms at Heaven’s Gate” and other poems with a similar dynamic as the expression of a set of desires and fears about masculine creativity.⁴

I would argue that Stevens’ first book repeatedly links death and the womb as a compromise between Stevens’ sense of masculine identity on the one hand and his ambition toward a creative fullness and fecundity that can only be called maternal on the other. Two essays in the 1993 *Wallace Stevens and the Feminine* that approach the dynamics of gender in his poetry come to a similar conclusion: Stevens’ work struggles with the process of individuation from a mother figure experienced as alternately engulfing and cold. As Mary B. Arensberg puts this:

To reexperience “the mother’s face” is a central idea or motivation behind the desires, narcissistic strivings, and quest for supreme fiction in the poetry of Wallace Stevens . . . [but] the healing of the poet’s scar scratched on the psyche by the absent or rejecting mother is another subtext in the emergence of the feminine in Stevens’ poetry. (24–26)

C. Roland Wagner makes a similar argument in more specifically psychoanalytic language, locating this conflicted relation in the preoedipal phase of development: “Ambivalent attachment to the nurturing, pre-Oedipal mother is central to our understanding of Stevens” (125). In the metaphorical language of “The Worms at Heaven’s Gate,” the articulate worms represent both a nurturing but potentially overwhelming mother and a companionable but potentially rejecting one, as well as connoting their slippery, uninviting entanglement in one another.

Wagner’s term, “pre-Oedipal,” is important because it points out that issues of male identity are inflected not only by Oedipal rivalry but also by genital difference from the mother, which complicates primary experiences of relatedness. Yet with respect to male identity, one should not insist on a rigid distinction between issues of connectedness and independence on the one hand and Oedipal envy on the other. As Nancy Chodorow has argued in *The Reproduction of Mothering*, consolidation of male identity is complicated even in the preoedipal period by both mother and son’s awareness of their gender difference. A longed-for experience of oneness

can come to seem a threat to secure gender identity, forcing a male child to choose between mother and self:

in societies like ours, which are male-dominated but have relatively father-absent families and little paternal participation in family life and child care, masculinity and sexual difference ("oedipal" issues) become intertwined with separation-individuation ("preoedipal") issues almost from the beginning of a boy's life. . . . [F]undamental feelings of dependence, overwhelming attachment, and merging with the mother, developed by a son during intense and exclusive early years, [are ones] that he feels he must overcome in order to attain independence and a masculine self-identification. (106)

Envy of the womb can be seen as a natural spot of developmental fixation, since it locks in place—through what Chodorow elsewhere calls the boy's compulsion to "distinguish and differentiate himself from others in a way that a girl need not" (174)—both the preoedipal fantasy of perfect union with the mother and the rivalrous possessiveness of the Oedipal phase. From such a position, envious corrupting of the womb in fantasy does the work of both externalizing intensely felt deficiencies of merger with a powerfully creative mother and managing the problematic assertion of gender identity. For a creatively aspiring man it has considerable appeal as a compromise.

OVERINCLUSIVENESS, "MAJOR MAN," AND BEYOND

The holograph manuscript of Stevens' 1944 poem "Esthétique du Mal" has a number of revealing differences from the final version of the poem, many of which are discussed in Jeff Jaeckle's 2005 essay "'These Minutiae Mean More': Five Editions of Wallace Stevens' 'Esthétique du Mal.'" One of the few differences not mentioned in that article is the shift from the holograph's "the adventurer / In humanity has not conceived a race / Completely physical in a physical world" to the ultimate "not conceived of a race / Completely physical" (WAS 4140 [12]). Stevens' relocation from the body to the mind as the source of generation is an understandable equivocation, particularly because he is talking about race, which occupies a space between the physical and the mental. Remarkable, though, in the context of his birth-death associations in *Harmonium*, is that Stevens could come to his formulation of what cultural work poetry should do in 1944 through an albeit finally occluded maternal metaphor.⁵

Stevens' imagination matured over twenty years and the changes in images of pregnancy and birth are a measure of that change. There is in the later poetry no envious corrupting of a fertile figure. But it is not only that shades of death and corruption around the subject of creative power diminish in the later work. Through a series of male figures, Stevens' imagination

also becomes in his later work increasingly overinclusive in Benjamin's sense of the term, representing masculinity as capable of a fertile enlargement, of pregnancy of a kind. Linked to Stevens' increasingly heroic aspirations for poetry in general and for his poetry in particular is the imagery of a male body that grows not out of desire but out of inclusiveness.

Later Stevens in short becomes increasingly tolerant of, and even drawn to, maternal identifications that can coexist with his idealization of masculinity. In reading him this way I rely on psychoanalytic thought not only for terms to describe the evolution of his work but also for a term to explain how poetry fosters emotional development. Poetry was for Stevens what the critic Frank B. Farrell has recently called, borrowing from the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, "transitional space." Transitional phenomena, according to Winnicott, are those that help a child through early experiences of separation by allowing him to give symbolic presence to an absent mother. (Winnicott argues, in a seminal 1966 paper, "The Location of Cultural Experience," that culture is an adult manifestation of transitional symbolization.) Farrell calls literature "transitional space" because of the way its language bears the marks of the developmental challenges—the difficult separations—that it works out and in which it has its roots:

[L]iterary language . . . will be in its very nature a response to mourning and loss, an acknowledgment of what is both left behind and held on to in a different manner. The writer's working through language will repeat and compensate for various kinds of necessary separations, both personal and cultural. The losses . . . that are the occasion for a poem . . . have a peculiar affinity, then, with the character of the literary space that represents them, so that one thinks of that space as having required them, as having called them forth precisely to let the language do its sophisticated transitional work. (189–90)

One of the projects of Stevens' writing, seen from this perspective, is to experience the desire for creative fullness without an envious imaginary corrupting of the womb, to bring together that primordial image of creativity with his own sense of independence in his masculine identity. Poems facilitate, and are the evidence of, Stevens' transition to a more tolerant attitude toward an inescapably powerful though necessarily partially frustrated longing.

In *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things*, James Longenbach argues that in Stevens' attempt to "reassert (sexual) difference more schematically than ever before" during the Second World War, he "goes so far as to recast childbearing as a masculine power" (231, 235). Longenbach's insightful and provocative reading rests predominantly on the poems "The Woman That Had More Babies Than That" and "Chocorua to Its Neighbor." He is right to remark on a change of intensity in Stevens' masculinism.

Yet he probably overstates the importance of the war in the development of a tendency present in Stevens' work from his first book. In my view, Stevens' poetry carries out a gradually marked transition toward integration of his gender identity with his maternal identifications. The pattern of imagery in which later Stevens depicts a masculine figure as itself enlarging to include other bodies goes through three discernable phases of development. The first, playful period of "The Man With the Blue Guitar," who plays "A million people on one string" and promises to "evolve a man" (136, 149) from his music, is a preliminary but significant movement toward the more recurrent images of enlarged soldiers in Stevens' poetry of the Second World War and of solar roundness in his postwar poetry. Both of these later phases are overinclusive, attributing to an explicitly masculine figure a maternal capability to generate and shelter human life, and they mark, first in a military and then in a natural register, Stevens' gradual resolution of his earlier uneasiness about bringing together a sense of masculinity on the one hand and a sense of creative fullness on the other.

"Man and Bottle" can be read as Stevens' first re-writing of the image of the man with the blue guitar into a military key, as the image of a lone man with a necked container remains constant while the content of the poem shifts from music to war and destruction, activating the title's pun on "battle." Destruction is no less a presence in this poem than it was in the birth-death poems of *Harmonium*, but there is now an alternative to the womb-tomb in Stevens' imagination, as he establishes a contrast between an imperiled, feminine container ("romantic tenements") and a strong masculine one in the poem's early lines:

The mind is the great poem of winter, the man,
Who, to find what will suffice,
Destroys romantic tenements
Of rose and ice

In the land of war. More than the man, it is
A man with the fury of a race of men,
A light at the centre of many lights,
A man at the centre of men. (218)

The "romantic tenements" are destroyed in the "land of war," being made from too fragile or impermanent materials, in contrast to the mind's iconoclastic, enduring power. But this is not simply a Platonic response to war. Stevens is both unsettled by and admiring of the mind that is like a "man with the fury of a race of men," and he imagines this mind as capable of transforming not only the thoughts but also the bodies of men. Where the man with the blue guitar symbolically created a community, this heroic

figure is at the “centre of men” collectively, but also in a sense physically, turning them into gestating, preserving bodies in the midst of destruction.

In “Gigantomachia” this admiration for an enlarged and fecund male figure becomes more explicit and less ambivalent, signaling not only an increasing regard for the ideal of the soldier in Stevens’ poetry of the Second World War but also an increasing tendency to separate violence from birth or growth. In a three-stanza poem about “what war magnified,” the closing stanza imagines soldiers this way:

Each man himself became a giant,
Tipped out with largeness, bearing the heavy
And the high, receiving out of others,
As from an inhuman elevation
And origin, an inhuman person,
A mask, a spirit, an accoutrement.
For soldiers, the new moon stretches twenty feet. (258)

In one sense this poem celebrates “courage” as a largeness of heart that extends to the rest of the body. But it also imagines *esprit de corps* as an insemination. The connotations of a healthy fecundity in the poem contrast strikingly with those of *Harmonium*—the dark moon distends protectively rather than revealing a “cadaverous bloom” as in “The Comedian,” and the soldiers themselves bear heaviness with a stolidity missing in the overripe squashes of “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle.” The soldiers maternally grow with “an inhuman person.” Though this masculine distention is generated in part by their heroism in the war of the *gigantomachia*, the pregnant figure is not itself associated with death or corruption. The enlarged and life-bearing body has become male in Stevens’ imagination, and it has become free from the taint of decay.

The culmination of this tendency to imagine a healthy, roundly fertile male figure in Stevens’ wartime poetry comes through the recurrent notion of “major man,” a concept alluded to in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” and described this way in “Repetitions of a Young Captain”:

Millions of major men against their like
Make more than thunder’s rural rumbling. They make
The giants that each one of them becomes

In a calculated chaos: he that takes form
From the others, being larger than he was,
Accoutred in a little of the strength

That sweats the sun up on its morning way
To giant red, sweats up a giant sense
To the make-matter, matter-nothing mind. . . . (271–72)

By the time Stevens could write this poem, the million-in-one figure of the man with the blue guitar had been wholly resituated into a military context. And the “fury of a race of men” had become the singular captain’s exertion that, in an image suggestive of both the labor and creativity of childbirth, “sweats up a giant sense,” his distinctively masculine “strength” leading to enlargement and fulfillment. This major man is large in the sense that he is a giant, but he is also fertile in a feminine sense in that he takes form from others rather than giving it. The “make-matter” mind of major man is a generative *mater* by which he seems to undergo the physical changes of pregnancy and childbirth—enlargement, exertion, and creation.⁶

There is nothing decadent about this process, a sign that Stevens’ overinclusive imagination has, through a fascination with the heroic power of the soldier, made a transition away from envy of the womb and toward maternal yet masculine identifications. Death is no longer a necessary element of an enlarged creative figure. But the destruction of war does inform each of the poems of this period employing imagery of pregnancy. Although not inherent in the enlarged masculine body, death and decay are a part of the process of his growth. In the poems of the postwar period, however, Stevens begins to imagine a swelling masculine fecundity that is wholly apart from the violence of war, connected to nature in general and in particular to the roundness and creative power of the sun.

Stevens’ persistent overinclusiveness in poems spanning more than a decade adds plausibility to the idea that they are, among a number of other things, elaborating a gradual inward transition. Already in “Chocorua to Its Neighbor,” Stevens imagines a masculine natural spirit as growing larger and then giving birth to itself, a natural force speaking its own heroic self-generation. It is in the figure of the sun, however, that this masculine power seems to come to a perfection, as in “The Red Fern,” which contrasts sunrise with the unfurling of the plant giving the poem its name:

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

There are doubles of this fern in the clouds,
Less firm than the paternal flame,
Yet drenched with its identity,
Reflections and off-shoots, mimic-motes

And mist-mites, dangling seconds, grown
Beyond relation to the parent trunk:
The dazzling, bulging, brightest core,
The furiously burning father-fire . . . (316–17)

In contrast with the “unfamiliar” fern, the sun itself shoots off red branches in the clouds with a “paternal” generative power. The opening of the fern itself is like a bloody birth, pushing red after red, but the sun enacts another kind of parturition, “furiously burning” to produce “dangling seconds” of red-tinged clouds. The “firm” flame is a “father-fire,” unambiguously masculine, but it is also a “bulging” “parent trunk” whose generative powers are at their fullest, physically and figuratively. The synthetic power of “major man” has become subsumed into the natural power of the “brightest” single star, which creates while being free of any taint of death.

“Credences of Summer” continues this figuration of the sun as a masculine birth-giver, bringing the birth-death association to its ultimate uncoupling in Stevens’ work by presenting the summer as a culmination of the year, an ending of the growth of spring, and yet as an ending that is full rather than decadent, “the barrenness / Of the fertile thing that can attain no more” (323). The stasis and plentitude of summer is a contrast to the desirous becoming of spring, and the sun is its presiding spirit, as in the third section of the poem:

It is the natural tower of all the world,
The point of survey, green’s green apogee,
But a tower more precious than the view beyond,
A point of survey squatting like a throne,
Axis of everything, green’s apogee

And happiest folk-land, mostly marriage-hymns.
It is the mountain on which the tower stands,
It is the final mountain. Here the sun,
Sleepless, inhales his proper air, and rests.
This is the refuge that the end creates.

It is the old man standing on the tower,
Who reads no book. His ruddy ancientness
Absorbs the ruddy summer and is appeased,
By an understanding that fulfils his age,
By a feeling capable of nothing more. (323)

There is a sure note of finality in this description of “the refuge that the end creates,” but there is also the suggestion of an insemination through the “ruddy summer” that is absorbed by the old man and that fulfils him. The old man himself, reddish like the sun of “The Red Fern,” stands atop the phallic figure of the tower, and his “feeling capable of nothing more” represents the consciousness of the “final mountain,” full in both a literal and metaphoric sense. The old man is a later version of major man, full-filled and enlarged like him, though in this case by the natural world rather

than an aroused community. He and the sun are a pair, each of them resting at a "green apogee" that comes at the end of a progression to mark a peak of development. Although the old man is not a figure of heroic power, he is a figure of creative fullness, blending feminine receptivity with a masculine identity, and his "age" is a point of culmination of life, of vitality, one that is not touched by morbidity or death.

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Notes

¹ For an exploration of the dynamic of "womb envy" and consequent repression and sexism at work in male modernist texts, see Susan Stanford Friedman's "Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse," *Feminist Studies* 13:1 (1987): 49–82.

² I do not mean to argue that Benjamin's intricate examination of the difficulty of gender identity is in every way appropriate to Stevens. In particular her exploration of the incessant alternation between experiences of likeness and difference in all important relationships calls deeply into question the possibility of maturing into the process of having a gender; such maturation is to me one of the most moving things about Stevens' body of work. My argument relies on her observations about the phenomenon of overinclusive fantasy and its transitional use from one conception of one's gender to another, aspects that can be separated from her underlying and more controversial theory of identity.

³ Wallace Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 55. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with page number only in parentheses.

⁴ Two feminist scholars, Janet Adelman in *Suffocating Mothers* and Elizabeth Sacks in *Shakespeare's Images of Pregnancy*, have taken this approach to figuration of the female body in Shakespeare's work. The question of engulfment by a maternal figure that they take up was first considered closely in a seminal paper by Karen Horney, the 1932 "The Dread of Woman," a text that is also important to Benjamin and Nancy Chodorow.

⁵ For a historical analysis of the association of labor with inept poetry in English, see Terry J. Castle's "Lab'ring Bards: Birth *Topoi* and English Poetics 1660–1820," particularly her claim that "after Dryden it becomes conventional to use the trope (of childbirth) as a negative model for the work of the bad artist" (198).

⁶ For a discussion of similar movements toward maternal identifications in the work of James Joyce and Henry Miller, respectively, see Jeanne Perreault's "Male Maternity in *Ulysses*" and Paul R. Jackson's "Henry Miller's Literary Pregnancies."

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“From this collision were new colors born”: Peter Redgrove’s Reversionary Swerves from Wallace Stevens’ Iconic Texts

ERIK MARTINY

PETER REDGROVE IS STILL not as widely known as he should be in America, despite the fact that he is without question one of the major figures of English poetry in the second half of the twentieth century, alongside Ted Hughes, Thom Gunn, Penelope Shuttle, Carol Ann Duffy, and Geoffrey Hill. Thanks to the efforts of *The Manhattan Review*, some of his iconic poems, such as “The Idea of Entropy at Maenporth Beach” and “Minerals of Cornwall, Stones of Cornwall,” have been given some airing, but on the whole Redgrove’s body of work is rarely broached in American periodicals. This is all the more surprising in light of the fact that, at least in his early writing, Redgrove interacted quite strenuously with the canonical works of modern American poetry, not least with that of Wallace Stevens. Although there are noticeable strains of T. S. Eliot and Walt Whitman in Redgrove’s work, Stevens’ intertextual presence is palpable in an often much more ostentatious way from Redgrove’s very first collections. Redgrove’s wife, the poet and novelist Penelope Shuttle, has claimed, “although Peter [Redgrove] read Eliot widely in his youth, it was Wallace Stevens who was the key poet for him from the American side of things.”¹

Stevens’ influence, or at least Redgrove’s interaction with some of his canonical texts, is apparent most strikingly in two eye-catching poems: the witty “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackboard” (*The Collector*) and just as obviously, if a good deal more challengingly and powerfully, in a later poem, “The Idea of Entropy at Maenporth Beach” (*Dr. Faust’s Sea-Spiral Spirit*). The order in which these appear in Redgrove’s oeuvre follows the order in which Stevens composed and published his own “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” and his later “The Idea of Order at Key West,” almost as if Redgrove were following in the master’s chronological footsteps. I will also examine the probable impact of Stevens’ “Mud Master” on Redgrove’s mud poems, an influence the English poet does not explicitly acknowledge and on which Redgrove scholars have not commented.

There is nothing subservient about the English poet’s intertextual posture in these two poems as the titles themselves suggest, despite the fact

that the poems appeared at a time when British poets were looking admiringly toward American models as an escape from the anti-modernist, anti-romantic, down-to-earth poetics of the Movement, which held sway in England throughout the 1950s. From a periodizing perspective, Redgrove's allusions to Stevens can be read as part of a general aesthetic trend in what is now known as the British Poetry Revival of the 1960s and 1970s, a period during which Redgrove began to cut his publication teeth. Redgrove's friend and mentor, the poet Martin Bell, was also greatly inspired by Stevens at the time. Bell's "Wallace Stevens Welcomes Dr Jung into Heaven" bears witness to the attraction exerted by American poetic license on aspirant British poets of the day: Stevens is represented here as an expansive, warmhearted, cornucopian figure who greets the writer into his enticing empire, presided over by his favorite poem: "And proffered to him saffron ice cream cones / Topped up with glacé cherries and chopped cashew nuts" (185).

If the aims of Redgrove and Stevens were somewhat dissimilar, there are nevertheless quite a number of resemblances between them. Although Redgrove began writing at a much later period, around the time when Stevens died, both poets have been viewed, for instance, as belated romantics. Indeed, Stevens and Dylan Thomas, another of Redgrove's forefathers (both died in the 1950s when Redgrove was emerging), have often been saluted as iconic figures of the "last romantic," to use W. B. Yeats's self-aggrandizing phrase.² Yet the successive presence of Stevens, Thomas, and Redgrove (among others) shows that there is no such thing as a last romantic, that there will always be a few isolated poets who will draw on the neo-romantic themes of their immediate forefathers. Neither Stevens nor Redgrove ultimately saw himself as a "last romantic" in the rather disillusioned sense in which the notion is employed by Yeats. Their most striking tonal characteristics are relentless exuberance and abiding optimism. Although Stevens saw the spiritual importance of fostering a kind of new romanticism in the 1930s, he possessed none of the eschatological melancholy that Yeats's combination of post-*fin-de-siècle* anxiety and millennial apocalypticism induced. Likewise, Redgrove saw himself as a perpetuator of romantic values rather than the last bastion of depth and true feeling in a world gone to rack and ruin. Although Yeats is imbued with Keatsian pessimism, Stevens and Redgrove both share a Wordsworthian sense of joy and purpose that both sustains and revitalizes.

Redgrove shared, and possibly inherited, some of his life-affirming exuberance from Stevens: his early "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackboard" stands in contrast to the tonally bleak poems characteristic of one ponderous branch of Redgrove's early work. A confessional negativism, which pervades such poems as "Pregnant Father," is entirely absent from the neo-Stevensian modernism of Redgrove's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackboard": the tonal monochord of the darker poems is replaced in this poem by a panoptic, optimistic outlook. From "The Idea of Entropy at Maenporth

Beach" onward, the poetry never flags in its unadulterated championing of the spiritual and material world. Even Stevens' lyrical transcendence of death is taken a step further into a celebration of death's dissolving, putrefying properties: the mud imagery in "The Idea of Entropy at Maenporth Beach" has as much to do with primeval eroticism as it does with being entropically mingled with a perfectly balanced combination of water and earth. The mud burial that Redgrove's persona undergoes is a death-related ritual inextricably combined with a brief moment of baptismal gestation in the thick amniotic liquid of the earth. After total submersion,

The mud recoils, lies heavy, queasy, swart.
But then this soft blubber stirs, and quickly she comes up
Dressed like a mound of lickerish earth,
Swiftly ascending in a streaming pat
That grows tall, smooths brimming hips, and steps out
On flowing pillars, darkly draped. (20–21)

The elemental mixture valorized in Redgrove's poem offers a metaphor for human interaction with nature. Mud is the ultimate gaudy image for the perfect alchemical admixture of the human and the natural, one which Redgrove possibly borrowed from Stevens' "Mud Master," lavishly extending the mellifluous miracles of its muck in a long succession of poems that span his whole career. Redgrove's Stevensian panache adds another contribution to the revalorization of mud-related imagery, stripping it of the negative associations with which it is generally weighted.³ Both poems transmute the melancholy connotations of texts that exemplify *nostalgie de la boue* into unadulterated mirth. As we will see, even if Redgrove's "Idea of Entropy at Maenporth Beach" is not reducible to merely that, it can be read convincingly as an original combination of Stevens' "Mud Master" and "The Idea of Order at Key West."

One other similarity that both poets share is that Redgrove and Stevens were ardent Francophiles who curiously nursed a profound aversion to traveling abroad. Although both poets relished the linguistic daring of the French Decadent poets and wrote panegyric rhapsodies of this aspect of late nineteenth-century French culture, they were disinclined to experience France at first hand. Like Stevens, Redgrove made a few timid journeys outside his native homeland, but what trips he did make were generally motivated by financial necessity. In his late forties, Redgrove became as patriotic as Stevens was in a rather insular way, partly because of the unsatisfactory conditions he felt he met with during his stays as writer-in-residence at Colgate University in the early 1970s.

Redgrove's celebratory exploration of his native country and especially Cornwall, his lifelong place of residence, matches Stevens' homebound relish for Florida and Connecticut. Maenporth Beach, where Redgrove's ashes were recently scattered, assumed the same importance that Key West

held for Stevens. This response to locale is prompted in great part by access to the sea, a vital focal point of the natural world that captured the attention of both poets in equal measure. The oceanic fascination for vast expanses of water that informs "The Idea of Order at Key West" and "The Idea of Entropy at Maenporth Beach," as well as many other texts by both poets, is arguably that which brings them closest, in that for both it represents the ceaseless and unpredictable movement of the imagination, infinite potential, an image for the abundance of poetic rhapsody, and, perhaps especially in Redgrove's case, the allure of entropic oblivion. The sole difference between their representations of the sea underscores Redgrove's partial aesthetic and philosophical departure from Stevens' poem in that for Stevens the sea's "genius" is something that can be harnessed, "portioned out" (106) by language,⁴ whereas for Redgrove poetry is essentially about surrender to the immeasurable, unquantifiable depths.

Although Martin Bell's poem dramatizes a rapprochement between Stevens and Jung, Redgrove was in fact a much more conscious and meticulous practitioner of depth psychology and archetypal poetry than Bell was. Despite the fact that it interacts with the human and is itself intermittently personified by Stevens, Stevens' sea is finally quite alien, "Inhuman" (105) as he puts it, whereas in Redgrove's poetry it remains a systematic repository for the human unconscious. As in most Jungian poetry, words such as "deep" and "dark" abound: "And in their slithering passage to the sea / The shrugged-up riches of deep darkness sang" (21). For Stevens the sea is also unknowable in that it is "ever-hooded" and has a "dark voice," but it is also occasionally "merely a place" and "meaningless" (105). For the truly faithful Jungian disciple, the sea is never meaningless: such leavening skepticism never surfaces in Redgrove's conception of what the material world signifies (outside the flickers of demystifying doubt expressed in a limited number of the first melancholic elegies he wrote for his parents).

Despite the semantic weighting of these differing approaches to the material world, the poetics of place is of utmost importance to Redgrove and Stevens, who are both renowned for the essentially romantic idealization of their favorite haunts. Unlike Stevens, whose places of residence were fastidiously selected, Redgrove only partially chose to reside in Cornwall. The manuscript letters archived in the libraries of Sheffield and Leeds reveal that at quite an early stage he longed to be included in the literary mainstream and felt rather marginalized in "off-centre" southwest England. All romanticism set aside, if truth be told, Redgrove remained in Cornwall for financial reasons, but this does not lessen the authenticity of his geographic rhapsodies, which can be said to bear Stevens' mark, not least in the fact that they insistently glamorize the natural allures of the provincial world and systematically transmute the potentially negative. In brief, if Key West is Stevens' American *locus amoenus*, Redgrove's ceaseless renderings of Cornwall bear witness to how he can

transform what he perceived to be a literary backwater, a cultural *locus terribilis* of sorts for the unknown, aspiring writer, into a makeshift, make-do paradise. It might be pointed out of course that even Stevens resorted to textually meliorating his Eden. As Alain Suberchicot points out, Key West is a most incongruous place to use as a site in which to celebrate order, since “that holiday resort for rich Americans was more of a playground than a haven of peace designed for spiritual exercise” (93).⁵

It is tempting to say that the resemblances between both poets end at this point, as Redgrove and Stevens are ultimately rather different animals. Despite the complexity of many of Redgrove’s works, he is finally more spiritual and sensual than cerebral in his apprehensions of the material world, and yet his allusions to Stevens’ canonical poems bear witness to his interaction with both Stevens’ whimsicality and his romantic-cum-modernist leanings.

Published in 1960, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackboard” is one of the first pastiches, if not the very first, of Stevens’ poem, composed long before parodies of the text became a staple assignment of every university writing class. It is simultaneously both a serious homage to Stevens and a tongue-in-cheek deconstruction of high-minded modernist concerns. When compared with other closely modeled poems that take on iconic texts, such as Kenneth Koch’s extensive rewriting of William Carlos Williams’ “This is just to say” or Allen Ginsberg’s “Written in My Dream by William Carlos Williams,” Redgrove’s hypertextual reading of Stevens’ poem appears to be a mixed response. Koch’s poem is a mock-heroic extension of the possibilities of Williams’ minimalist art that is essentially parodic in a warm-humored way:

I gave away the money that you had been saving to live on
for the next ten years.
The man who asked for it was shabby
and the firm March wind on the porch was so juicy and
cold. (Koch 68)

Ginsberg’s poem, on the other hand, is a serious and humble attempt to transcribe a dream-sequence in which he claims to have heard Williams dictate a (nevertheless somewhat Ginsbergian) poem to him:

“As Is
you’re bearing

a common
Truth

Commonly known
as desire

No need
to dress

it up
as beauty

No need
to distort

what's not
standard

to be
understandable." (807)

The full text is even put in quotation marks and Ginsberg forfeits his characteristic Whitmanian long line in favor of Williams' minimalist use of lineation, for the duration of the text, giving himself up to his late mentor in a way that is similar to the romantic poets' surrender to divine afflatus.

Redgrove's text hovers somewhere in between these two approaches, alternating between teasing parody and serious appropriation of his forebear's method and spirit. His poem maintains Stevens' oscillatory movement between the rhapsodic and the laconic. However, if he retains Stevens' roman numerals as well as his thirteen sections, he is quite free and unprogrammatically in his ordering of the sequence, unlike the parodies that have appeared since. Stevens' opening "Among twenty snowy mountains, / The only moving thing / Was the eye of the blackbird" (74) only surfaces in the third part as "Among twenty silent children / The only moving thing / Is the chalk's white finger" (12), thus maintaining Stevens' breathtaking silence and upsetting the order of his color contrasts as well as his clear-cut distinction between the animate and the inanimate. Stevens' second tercet reappears modified in Redgrove's seventh section and the original's memorable fourth part ("A man and a woman / Are one. / A man and a woman and a blackbird / Are one" [75]) is parodied in Redgrove's fifth section as "A man and a child / Are one. / A man and a child and a blackboard / Are three" (12) offering a vision of both unity/disunity and a tongue-in-cheek, cheeky display of mathematical mastery.

Redgrove's poem is in some ways a textbook example of emulation in that it alternatively illustrates the gravitational pull of model imitation and the allure of departing from the master. The slippage from blackbird to blackboard also betokens more than a mere flight from Stevens' feathered creature. The motif of the blackboard and its attendant metaphor of learning and teaching is an apposite image of what is happening in this poem on an intertextual level. Redgrove both learns from the master and "teaches" him a playful lesson on the blackboard—a lighthearted version of Harold

Bloom's corrective "swerves" (14), not that at this stage in his career Redgrove displayed the desire or the capacity to measure himself up to or rectify the master. In this early response to the American poet, Redgrove takes Stevens' rather sober surrealist touches over the edge, replacing his celebration of Connecticut with his own longing to valorize the local:

He ambles among the white rocks of Dover,
Crushing pebbles with black boots.
He is a small blackboard
Writing on chalk. (13)

As intriguing as this early poem is, it nevertheless remains somewhat derivative when compared with Redgrove's later Stevens-inspired poem. If his blackboard variation does not quite rival Stevens' original for the simple reason that its structure is too closely faithful, "The Idea of Entropy at Maenporth Beach" indicates in its very title both its source of inspiration and its greater measure of freedom from the forebear. In fact, the text comes close to outdoing Stevens and has achieved canonic status in Britain, becoming one of Redgrove's most widely anthologized poems. The poem was originally published in *Dr Faust's Sea-Spiral Spirit* and subsequently appeared in *The Manhattan Review* in the early 1980s, at a time when Redgrove was seeking recognition abroad, and recently in a 2005 tribute volume of the same review. Unlike Redgrove's blackboard poem, "The Idea of Entropy at Maenporth Beach" has nothing imitative about it. In fact, other than the maritime setting and the preoccupation with water and femininity there is little intertextually to link the two poems.

As Neil Roberts remarks, Stevens' singer "has a certain monumental remoteness. . . . There is certainly nothing in the least erotic about her. She seems to belong to an earlier tradition of feminine personification of ideals (not, perhaps dissociated from idealization of women themselves). . . . [T]he femininity of his Idea is provokingly and enigmatically empty" (61). He goes on to suggest that Redgrove's poem "is perhaps a not entirely ironic homage. Both poems are concerned with transformation and creativity. But for Stevens the 'Idea' is insistently ideational; the sea is 'wholly body' in the most reductive sense, that in which the body is conceived as clothing" (62). Despite her allegorical nature, Redgrove's female embodiment remains resolutely bound to the physical rather than the metaphysical, as the concept of entropy suggests. Redgrove's Bloomian corrective movement occurs from the outset: he buttonholes Stevens' singer, giving her both weight and voice. Stevens' conceptual sensuality is replaced by a full-bodied, eroticized textual fabric and his elusive, almost invisible singer becomes a feast for the senses, not to say an erotic spectacle offered to the reader's gaze.

Throughout Redgrove's "Idea of Entropy at Maenporth Beach," the sounds and images that are produced by sinking into the mud bath are

precisely what Stevens initially refuses to call “medleyed sound” (105). It is Redgrove’s female bather, coupled to the sibilant language itself, that makes the mud sing under the pressure of her textualized body. Despite Stevens’ desire to resist indeterminacy, his “The Idea of Order at Key West” is also partly bent on celebrating interaction: the sea makes the singer sing and the singer heightens the beauty of the sea. This kind of contrastive enhancing is thus at work in both poems, and finally what seems to distinguish them is Stevens’ longing for the transcendental. As its title implies, Redgrove’s “The Idea of Entropy at Maenporth Beach” is, by contrast, entirely given over to the notion of immanence: it is a paean to synthesis whereas Stevens’ is a meticulous celebration of the respective merits of sea and song, culminating in their grandiose interaction.

Both poems stress the importance of poetic craft but for Redgrove the structuring and ordering of the semantic sounds on the page are ultimately subsumed to what they are describing. His language draws attention to itself but its primary function is to heighten the power of the poetic drama being enacted. Stevens’ climactic moment is profoundly metatextual: “Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon, / The maker’s rage to order words of the sea” (106). Taking the risk of being reductive in attempting to distinguish these two poems, one could argue that Stevens’ poem is finally concerned with self-awareness and self-containment whereas Redgrove’s poem aims to underscore the virtues of self-abandon and oblivion. Ultimately, however, both poems contain contradictory drives towards both entropy and self-consciousness.

James Longenbach observes that “responding to Fernandez’s dogmatism, Stevens might have titled his poem ‘The Idea of Disorder at Key West’ ” (162). Of course, this is to assume that “Ramon Fernandez” refers to the rigorous writer of that name, a supposition that is not ratified by the poem itself, and was not accredited by Stevens, but the same might be said of Redgrove’s revisionary version: its main focus is the search for disorder, not just as an idealization of chaos but as a release from the purely cerebral. Redgrove takes Stevens’ disembodied heroine and plunges her into a richly erotic primeval mud bath, as if dipping her in the very essence of matter to flesh her out. On a formal level, Redgrove breaks up Stevens’ regular pentameters into erratic and sporadic blank verse, as if to suggest a need for a more disorderly version of order:

The mud spatters with rich seed and ranging pollens.
Black darts up the pleats, black pleats
Lance along the white ones, and she stops
Swaying, cut in half. Is it right, she sobs
As the fat, juicy, incredibly tart muck rises
Round her throat and dims the diamond there?
It is right, so she stretches her white neck back

And takes a deep breath once and a one step back.
Some golden strands afloat pull after her.

The mud recoils, lies heavy, queasy, swart.
But then this soft blubber stirs, and quickly she comes up
Dressed like a mound of lickerish earth. . . . (20–21)

If we consider Longenbach's interpretation as a viable gloss, then Redgrove challenges Stevens in the same way as Stevens addresses Ramon Fernandez's overly rigid conceptualism. In any case, whether the name is referential or essentially a rhetorical device, Redgrove takes what comes through in every Stevens poem as Stevens' wariness of excessive orderliness a step further in the direction of entropic disorder. If one facet of Stevens' poem asserts the power of poetry and the mind over nature, as Helen Vendler and others have suggested, then Redgrove's poem argues much more unequivocally for an avowal of nature's essential superiority and its ascendancy over man. Redgrove seems to want to steer Stevens back toward unadulterated romantic praise for the genius of *genius loci*. In a word, he attempts to draw Stevens back from his moments of modernist skepticism to a more romantic orthodoxy:

She walks
In streaky white on dazzling sands that stretch
Like the whole world's pousy mud quite purged.
The black rooks coo like doves, new suns beam
From every droplet of the shattering waves,
From every crystal of the shattered rock. (21)

The poem ends not with the singer's song set off from the "meaningless plungings of water" (105) but with a focus on the restorative, pregnant song of the earth: "And in their slithering passage to the sea / The shrugged-up riches of deep darkness sang" (21). Ultimately, Redgrove seems more wholeheartedly nature oriented: it is not that he wishes to entirely forfeit human thought and artistic endeavor in favor of pure sensation, as Redgrove clearly does not eschew the merits of discourse, in this poem at least. Indeed his female speaker is quite intellectual in a very sensual, ingenuous, spontaneous way:

If it were a white dress, she said, with some little black,
Dressed with a little flaw, a smut, some swart
Twinge of ancestry, or if it were all black
Since I am white, but—it's my mistake.
So slowly she slunk, all pleated, into the muck. (20)

Redgrove's poem is essentially preoccupied by the necessity for man's close mimetic links with nature whereas Stevens', at least in the first third, is initially more at pains to dissociate the two ("The song and water were not medleyed sound" [105]), fascinated as Stevens is by the desire to apprehend and analyze the effects created by the tantalizing juxtaposition of natural and human-induced sublimity, even if "The Idea of Order at Key West" taken as a whole dramatizes the difficulty of extricating the one from the other. Redgrove attempts to guide his forefather back toward a less cogitative, more primal vision of perceptual experience, without disdaining discourse in the process. His poem is finally a homage that offers a redirection of Stevens' romanticism away from its cognitive strain toward its more ecstatic sensuous abandon, a process that entails a rebuttal of Stevens' rather ascetic, or at least submerged, eroticism.

Such a reading is, however, modified somewhat when seen from the perspective of other poems in Stevens' *Ideas of Order* collection. Read after Stevens' "Mud Master," Redgrove's "The Idea of Entropy at Maenporth Beach" appears in a somewhat different light—less as a corrective swerve away from Stevens than as an extension of the possibilities opened up by Stevens' slightly ambiguous yet essentially positive rendering of the mud metaphor. In "Mud Master," Stevens transforms the French naturalist writers' rather mournful *nostalgie de la boue* into a much more festive figure; Redgrove makes this trope for the wonders of disorder into the central hallmark of his poetic discourse. The speaker of Stevens' "Mud Master" asserts that for a time, "The mind is muddy" (147); Redgrove's claim in "The Idea of Entropy at Maenporth Beach" and several other mud poems is that the presence of this muddiness amounts to an essential acceptance and exploration of the dark, repressed, regressive drives. For Redgrove, mud represents primeval muck, the hidden visceral slime within us, menses, as well as other taboo bodily excretions such as feces; a much later poem in Redgrove's penultimate posthumous collection, *A Speaker for the Silver Goddess*, tropes mud as "tree-shit" ("Luck Bath" [74]).

Redgrove's mud figure is the ultimate lubricant that connects man to nature. Its melding of the two elements of earth and water makes it into a trope for undissociated harmonious interaction between the human and the non-human. It is a figure for wholesomeness, unity between human-kind and itself, prelapsarian humanity and its surroundings. In this light, Stevens' Mud Master is a godlike fertility figure that Redgrove's Mud Mistress accompanies, expanding Stevens' perception into an extended ritual.

If one sets Stevens' "Mud Master" aside, his emphasis in "The Idea of Order at Key West" appears much more genteel than Redgrove's "The Idea of Entropy at Maenporth Beach." Stevens' aestheticized subjects (the song and the sea) come across as uncontroversially beautiful whereas Redgrove's aesthetic project takes on a more gritty spectacle. Stevens' topic is centrally focused on the (con)sensual sea; Redgrove's preoccupation is

with the borderline beauty of mud. Even such contemporary poets as Derek Walcott, who are also bent on examining liminality and the interstitial, dwell on postcard spaces such as pristine beaches and the clean mixing of water and sand. Redgrove has always taken exception to the overly clean, the too-readily consumable pleasures of bourgeois beauty, as many of his odes to the alchemical virtues of urine, mud, and menses exemplify.

If one avoids examining the two "idea" poems in isolation, it ultimately seems difficult to polarize Stevens and Redgrove, as Stevens cannot be said to be less sensual (though he is less erotic) or metaphoric than Redgrove. If one had to draw a distinction it would perhaps be that as in "The Idea of Order at Key West," the figure imagined in "Mud Master" is fundamentally more conceptual and hard to visualize than Redgrove's incarnate character. It all comes down to Stevens' more abstract characterization in these specific poems. In this respect, Redgrove's Mud Mistress owes more to Baudelaire's *Ténébreuse*, a figure Redgrove also alludes to in the epigraph of his "The Idea of Entropy": "*C'est elle! Noire et pourtant lumineuse.*" Although the poem is indebted to Stevens, it lies at something of an intertextual crossroads in that it crosses Stevens with one of his own literary models, the decadent Baudelaire. Redgrove's female persona has ultimately more in common with the accentuated physicality of Baudelaire's glorious African, the one Baudelaire describes as being "Black yet luminous," than she does with Stevens' disembodied singer, a poetic character as transparent as the water she walks beside. Redgrove's text therefore bears the marks of both forefathers in that it dovetails Stevens' wandering, sensual yet not so carnal, imagination with Baudelaire's fleshy erotic verse. The poem thus partially departs from Stevens in that it combines the virtues of another forebear and displays the poet's mastery of influence. Redgrove's text is thus as much about mixing authors as it is about medleyed sounds and symbiotic relationships.

One last consideration that departs somewhat from these issues but that should nevertheless be entertained in a rounded study of these texts is that all three poems—Baudelaire's "Les Ténèbres," Stevens' "Mud Master," and Redgrove's "The Idea of Entropy at Maenporth Beach"—immediately reveal that they were written at a time when postcolonial preoccupations did not yet hold sway or carry much clout in the world of occidental letters. The last two poems bear the marks of racial imagery that associates mud (valorized as it may be) with African skin complexion, a link that would be unthinkable in current conceptions of what is admissible in contemporary Western writing. Stevens' Mud Master is described as being the "Blackest of pickanines" (119), and Redgrove maintains this piece of risk-laden characterization calling his mud woman a "black Venus" (21) and "that negress running on the beach" (21). Added to Stevens' potentially objectionable racial reference, Redgrove also runs the risk of equating women with the natural world as well as with biological process. It is of course important not to erase the reality of Stevens'

period-related racial prejudices and to remember that Redgrove openly felt that women were closer to nature than men were. These essentialist visions are ultimately open to criticism, yet one might also argue that they stem from a desire to praise rather than from a programmatic decision to reduce the capabilities of women and non-Europeans. Redgrove expands the possibilities of female behavior, combining Stevens' *Mud Master* with his *Singer* to create a new, unladylike, uninhibited, untrammelled woman.

To suggest, as this article might be construed to imply, that Stevens was the one major influence on Redgrove would perhaps overstate the American poet's importance to the origins and development of Redgrove's aesthetic, as well as his emotional attachment to this major authorial figure. Comparatively speaking, Redgrove has devoted more textual space to poets such as Langland and Rimbaud and almost as much to Robert Browning and Dylan Thomas. Langland is the poet Redgrove cites in all his interviews as being the one epiphanic literary discovery for him in the early 1950s when he was studying natural science at Cambridge. The medieval poet's texts are repeatedly drawn upon throughout Redgrove's poetry, his alliterative diction employed time and time again, the riddling Anglo-Saxon strangeness of his metaphors taken as a model for linguistic play. After having been keeled over by Langland, Redgrove went on to read the poets that followed him, being unimpressed by what he, Ted Hughes, and other English poets emerging in the early 1960s perceived as the Movement's unadventurous lack of poetic ambition, and so he turned to the most un-Movement-like poets of the day: the lately fallen giants, Dylan Thomas and Wallace Stevens.

The use of writerly figures as personae within poems is arguably a yardstick that measures the extent of a poet's fascination for his forefathers. If such a scale were to be established, running from discreet, occasional allusion to full intertextual response, leading on to the representation of forebears as characters, then Redgrove's preoccupation with Stevens is not quite as full-bodied as it could be. His relationship to Stevens remains purely intertextual. It falls short of the kind of hero worship in which Martin Bell engages in his theatrical homage to Jung and Stevens. Of all the poets alluded to in Redgrove's oeuvre, only Langland is given a physical (if somewhat ethereal) presence as a character to be encountered on an intertextual but also interpersonal level. As he puts it in "The Handclasp" (*Sheen*),

So we greet
 one another, I as towards
 A perfected master—we clasp hands firmly,
 his touch refreshes,
 It is cool to my hand like
 the passing of a ghost or a mood
 or an aethyr— (125–26)

Redgrove's response to Stevens does not reach the level of fascination giving rise to character representation, but the American poet's paean to the imagination as well as his synaesthetic revelry is something that shoots through Redgrove's work from start to finish.

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Notes

¹Penelope Shuttle, letter to the author, 20 January 2005.

²"We were the last romantics," W. B. Yeats, "Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931," *Poems*, 41.

³In a letter to William Rose Benét, written in 1933, Stevens points out that for him the best kind of poetry should pervade the innate garishness of linguistic permutation: "I think I should select from my poems as my favorite the Emperor of Ice Cream. This wears a deliberately commonplace costume, and yet seems to me to contain something of the essential gaudiness of poetry; that is the reason why I like it" (L 263).

⁴Wallace Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 105. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with page number only in parentheses.

⁵"Ce lieu de villégiature pour Américains fortunés était plus une cour de récréation qu'un havre de paix voué aux exercices spirituels."

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Poems

Villanelle

Death is the mother of beauty.

—Wallace Stevens

Death is the mother of beauty:

perhaps the lawyer found a small dead beetle
or the rattled tattle-tell tail of the bookworm

turning out the carcass of the living page. Did he see
death and beauty on a lady's handkerchief settle
inside the drawer beside beetle and tome? To mother beauty

out of death, the perfumed linen is the very
scent of death. If the Hawaiian white ginger fell,
pressed flower, out of the law book: or, the trail of the bookworm

led back to the hibiscus and jasmine, meeting destiny
preserved inside his great books of law; and the shell
left empty at the shore. *Death is the mother of beauty,*

of the little beetle in the narrow drawer. Plea
of his wife to make love and the look of ecstasy
nearly the look of death's eyes as the bookworm's

rattle falls quiet. He understood measure, iambics, repartee,
recursion and cadence. To make love to make death to make beauty:
his honeymoon conceived that *death is the mother of beauty;*
beside the Floridian blooms, still the rattled tail of the bookworm.

Valerie Wohlfeld
Newburyport, Mass.

Recital

Music is feeling, then, not sound. . . .

—Wallace Stevens

Always a long shot, music lessons.
Swaggering metronome, the doubted heart.
The hope for a hand-me-down truth.

Crepe paper: red, white, and mauve.
Lemonades on a lined table.
Smug forks, small ingots of cake.

The tallow-faced prodigy at the piano,
exempt from baseball, tugs his cuffs,
the silk tie noosing his thin neck,

begins. The first notes like a vase
hitting the floor, pieces skittering.
Doves, gloaming, russet fur,

the arpeggios rippling
the way sleeping lovers separate,
sprawl, dream. Quotidian grace.

As Beethoven wrote in a letter,
*Spread as many good things about you
as these evil times permit.*

Millponding swans, spiffy glade,
those fingers gathering flowers,
nethered light, our gratitudes.

James Magorian
Lincoln, Neb.

Blackbirds

A dappled brown sparrow rests
on a kitchen towel. Neither young nor old
but of some indeterminate age.
Death would not be your first thought
but her breathing comes in short spurts of life,
her feathers ripple as if in a wind, yet the air is still.
She can neither sit nor stand but tilts dangerously
as if taking a curve in the road
or making a steep skyward sparrow-bank,
one that bends time and slides on wind currents
in some larger sky. I press the towel to prop her up.
For a moment she looks at me not afraid
but with assessment.
Buttressed by the towel she can not
tilt to either side, so she falls backward
her head inclines sharply
wings extended high
eyes looking out from some
parallel sparrow universe
some place knowable only to birds.

Startled by a sudden wind gust
blackbirds swirl in expanding circles
their shadows marking the edges
of hemlock trees. Through the sun
it begins to rain.

Steve DeFrance
Long Beach, Calif.

Commemorated with a Jar

All Saints' Day: we're driving
your mobile home through Tennessee

to find the hill Wallace Stevens
commemorated with a jar.

The ripple of the asphalt lulls us
into rhythms too lilting

to ignore, so we park and withdraw
to the bedroom. A fire bristles

in the brick fireplace. Caged birds
sing the *Internationale*

over and over, every verse.
Our bodies interlock, solving

the ultimate jigsaw puzzle
while from a few feet away we watch.

Bored by these acrobatics
we retreat to the eat-in kitchen

and brew tea the color of toast.
As we drink this testy Ceylon brew

we feel more like Wallace Stevens
than we should. We imagine that jar

sweating with pride as the saints
rise from the rubble of their bones

and march past in review, singing
hymns even more resounding

than the *Internationale*.

The mobile home lurches, storm

rasps across the corrugations
of the slime-green landscape. We dress

our delinquent torsos and resume
our drive, the two-lane highway

sullen with rain. At last we top
a familiar rise, and there beyond

a shabby gray barn the hill
of hills gleams with freshly mown pride.

Yes, the jar stood here as long
as Stevens willed it, remapping

the subtlest contours to conform
to a large, efficient intellect

convinced more than we'll ever be
of the stark utility of law.

William Doreski
Keene, N.H.

Mere Color

*Jorge Borges reportedly sniffed on being read
Wallace Stevens' "Sea Surface Full of Clouds"*

a bleak dismissal, who heard
Brilliant iris on the glistening blue, and thought
perhaps too closely, whose

eyes opaque, or closed while listening—
heard *breakfast jelly yellow* streak the poet's deck
as an impinging rudeness, *green*

Gave suavity to the perplexed machine
in a pistache of repetitious chocolates
and umbrellas—

. . . green blooms turning crisped the motley hue
To clearing opalescence, and wondered,
blinded, how.

Ruth Moon Kempher
St. Augustine, Fla.

Reviews

The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens.

Edited by John N. Serio. Cambridge (England): Cambridge University Press, 2007.

This comprehensive and many-faceted *Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens* offers an impressive collection of essays illuminating one of the greatest poets of modernism. It is no news that Wallace Stevens is quite possibly the most enigmatic of all these poets, and probably the most difficult to grasp. For the beginner, a Stevens poem may resist the intelligence as a virgin resists a suitor. But these poems, full of colors and seasons, strange birds and odd characters—poems that are reflective, experimental, comic, despairing, playful, sensuous, transgressive, sonorous, dissonant—are the same ones that yield an attentive reader increasing delight over time. Beamed at students who are beginning the study of Stevens, the scholarship represented in this collection is perhaps even more useful to teachers, as well as providing a guide to the perplexed “common reader.” A detailed chronology precedes the fourteen critical essays, while the back includes a helpful “Guide to Further Reading” and an index.

John N. Serio’s informing and lucid introduction covers major themes of the poetry: Stevens’ comic spirit, his delight in language, “the way his musical lines dazzle one” into affirming the illogical (1). Serio provides a strong frame for the essays that follow, expanding on the poet’s unique choices of subject, his philosophical bent, the depth of the *negativa* in the poetry, the aesthetic drive that verges always on the realm of spirit, and the presence of paradox throughout the canon. He touches on matters of style, and points readers to well-known poems to illustrate the variousness of Stevensian poetics, but he also discusses the rarely critiqued “Dove in the Belly” to suggest that it contains “some of the most sensuous evocations of the beauty of nature in all of Stevens” (5). Serio’s introduction notes Stevens’ shyness, his famous personal diffidence: “He cringed at opportunities for publicity” (1). It ranges the poet alongside Robert Frost and T. S. Eliot, Albert Einstein and Ralph Waldo Emerson, and concludes by introducing readers to the various critical and historical perspectives they will encounter in the pages ahead.

Taking them in turn: Robert Rehder’s “Stevens and *Harmonium*” is followed by Alan Filreis’ “Stevens in the 1930s,” Milton Bates’s sharp focus on “Stevens and the Supreme Fiction,” and B. J. Leggett’s useful commentary on “Stevens’ Late Poetry.” James Longenbach neatly handles “Stevens and His Contemporaries,” Joseph Carroll takes on “Stevens and Romanticism,” Bart Eeckhout examines “Stevens and Philosophy,” and George S. Lensing concentrates on “Stevens’ Seasonal Cycles.” Helen Vendler’s elegant “Stevens and the Lyric Speaker” prepares the way for Beverly Maeder on “Stevens and Linguistic Structure.” Bonnie Costello elucidates “Stevens and Painting,” Jacqueline

Vaught Brogan presents her views on "Stevens and the Feminine," and David R. Jarraway tackles the problem of "Stevens and Belief."

Launching the essays that comprise the *Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens* is Joan Richardson's succinct biographical profile. Author of a comprehensive two-volume biography of the poet, Richardson also brings a unique understanding of the contribution of Emerson and William James to American thought and is well qualified to suggest their influence on Stevens' philosophy, psychology, and poetics. "Wallace Stevens: A Likeness" traces the poet's life from his boyhood in Reading and rural Pennsylvania to the recognition and acclaim achieved in his final years.

Although each of the essays in this "teaching text" contributes either an approach to Stevens' *oeuvre*, or acquaintance with a particular mode of criticism, some are outstanding. There is Bates's supremely logical, penetrating analysis of Stevens' notion of a "supreme fiction," a concept central to the entire canon—to the whole of *Harmonium*, so to speak. Bates reveals manifold aspects of Stevens' struggle with what was once known as the theological problem of "double truth" (logic vs. faith) and illustrates his points with characteristic precision from the poetry itself. There is Vendler's remarkable anatomy of discourse in Stevens' poetry. This critical study develops as a kind of literary *Goldberg Variations* that distinguishes Stevens' voices, whether personal, collective, narrative, reflective, prophetic, or axiomatic, and asks the reader to consider, among other things, just *who* is being addressed. Vendler's opening contrasts Stevens' lyric speaker with voices in the poetry of Marianne Moore and Langston Hughes, Shakespeare and Wordsworth, and later on, as one might expect, with Keats. With its exemplary opening, its brilliant reading of such difficult poems as "The Hermitage at the Center," its student-friendly exposition, its range of example, its transparent clarity—especially in revealing complexities and complications—this essay not only posits but persuades. No other critic has an ear like Vendler's.

These are old friends, and we can add two later Stevens scholars to the must-read list: Longenbach on Stevens' contemporaries and Costello on Stevens and painting, along with an even more recent contributor, Beverly Maeder, who delves brilliantly into the poet's linguistic structures. Longenbach, in ten pages, accomplishes a tour de force. His is the shortest essay (with close to the most endnotes). The reader is situated in the aesthetic context of early modernism and, historically, in the postwar period of World War I. Stevens' contemporaries—Pound, Eliot, Williams, Frost, Moore, and H. D.—are introduced in terms of relative impact and stylistic approach (objectivist-imagist vs. symbolist techniques). Although Longenbach rightly contrasts the styles of Pound and Eliot with those of Stevens and Moore, he takes care to note that Stevens used all the forms and techniques in question and goes on to single out the poets of the next generation who were shaped in some way by Stevens' "seriously playful sensibility" (76): Elizabeth Bishop, Randall Jarrell, James Merrill, John Ashbery, Charles Olsen, and Susan Howe. (One might go on to include the "language poets" of a third generation, such as Ann Lauterbach.) Longenbach goes straight to "Nuances of a Theme by Williams," reading Stevens' dialogue with his fellow poet's spare evocation of the

evening star, "El Hombre," as a species of symbolist riff, "playing out the implications of Williams' poem, not turning against it" (78). There is a finely-tuned commentary on "The Plain Sense of Things," and an unusual, prosodic-syntactic-soundboard exposition of "The Snow Man"—with its "drive toward predication," its enjambments, "half-rhymes," and sound play (81). Although "play" in its various aspects in Stevens' poems is a major motif in Longenbach's essay, his critique concludes with thoughtful pages on the poetry of war and the changing positions of the modernist masters. This is a brilliantly simple, informing piece, full of astute observations, wit, and originality.

Bonnie Costello's comprehensive and beautifully written coverage of Stevens and the painters who influenced his work contains no notes and names no sources (not even Glen MacLeod's groundbreaking *Wallace Stevens and Modern Art: From the Armory Show to Abstract Expressionism*), although students interested in research will find a list of studies in the *Companion's* "Guide to Further Reading" under the heading "Stevens and Painting." Costello opens her discussion with Stevens' own 1952 lecture on the relations between poetry and painting, and she goes on to characterize some of the painters whose names appear in Stevens' letters, essays, and poems:

He liked the classicism of Claude Lorrain, the silvery atmosphere of Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot, the struggle for realization in Paul Cézanne, the decreative energy of Pablo Picasso, the comic-tragic disposition of Paul Klee, the virility of Pierre Tal-Coat. (164)

Stevens' early hauntings of museums and libraries are detailed, as are his attendance at the Arensberg Circle, the effect of the 1913 Armory Show, and the poet's absorption of Dada and cubist innovations. Costello notes Stevens' proximity to the Wadsworth Atheneum—a rare supporter of innovative art—when he later relocated to Hartford, but she reminds the reader that the poet's "art-historical frame of reference" (166) included Italian Renaissance art, Dutch-genre painting, and French classicism and romanticism. She also reminds the reader that the landscape of America was crucial to Stevens' poetic process. Her thorough and theoretically informed exposition connects specific poems with specific painters, such as Stevens' portrait of "The Well Dressed Man with a Beard" and his "Study of Two Pears" with Cézanne. She easily attaches Stevens' "The Paltry Nude Starts on a Spring Voyage" to Botticelli. As Costello points out, Picasso is surely the lingering presence in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," and one might add that Stevens' "Poetry Is a Destructive Force" may well derive from Picasso's assertion, quoted by the poet (and Costello), that "a picture is a horde of destructions" (170). Costello's examination of genres—nude, still life, portrait, landscape—informs with both clarity and subtlety. One only wishes that her bountiful coverage had included "Holiday in Reality," with its setting in Durand-Ruell's art gallery and some mention of the Dutch painter Piet Mondrian, so highly esteemed by the poet.

Beverly Maeder's contribution is a bold, exacting exposure of Stevens' linguistics that ultimately defines the poet as an Olympic athlete of language. If it sends students, and teachers, back to the study of grammar and rhetoric, so

much the better. Maeder studies Stevens' *materia poetica* in terms of usage and figuration: stanzaic forms, metric patterns, rhythms, stress, and accentuation. "The Apostrophe to Vincentine" allows this critic to present an astute analysis of the poem's diction, Stevens' use of painterly language and classical rhetoric, and his exquisite ear for sound-play. The name Vincentine "can set off sound patterns," says Maeder, "enact an etymology, and acquire different syntactic functions as the poet moves the word and relates others to it from one stanza to the next," and she pictures Stevens "taking a hard look at words themselves and taking cues from the acoustic and visual materiality of words, not just their denotation and connotation" (152). One of the more engaging sections in the essay explores Stevens' use of French. One is reminded of his singular assertion, in "Adagia," that "French and English constitute a single language" (CPP 914). Maeder's reader is given a thorough coverage of Stevens' use of metaphor, tropes, and synesthesia (notably in "Nomad Exquisite"), and a thoughtful reading of Stevens' "Motive for Metaphor" with a concluding note on the tentativeness of the poem's final "X": "Instability of definition seems to belong to the grammatically energetic, ongoing momentum, the rhythmic fiber of the poem" (158). Maeder completes this complex and stimulating study with a philosophical exploration of Stevens' use of seeming and simile. All in all, this is a forceful essay, more and more engaging as one grasps its insights.

Finally, it must be said that the *Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens* is worth having, if only for Bart Eeckhout's beautiful treatment of Stevens and philosophy. This is a remarkably coherent, carefully organized exposition of a difficult, often vexed subject. Terms are defined, points illustrated, critical views cited, and although there are no extended "close readings," quotations from the poetry, letters, and talks are neatly woven into the discussion. Eeckhout's six-part treatment touches on Stevens' rejection of "analytic" philosophy, moves from the pre-Socratics (Heraclitus) and classical schools of Skepticism, Stoicism, and Epicureanism all the way to Kant and Nietzsche, the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger, and the deconstructions of Derrida. Emerson and William James are shown to have exerted their peculiarly American influence as Eeckhout illuminates the concepts in "Stevens' wonderfully inventive, unpredictable poems" (112). Eighteen endnotes encourage the student to search out the scholarship on the subject. Eeckhout concludes by recognizing Stevens' appeal to philosophy-oriented readers but, he sharply reminds us: "he remained a poet first and foremost, someone who could protest that 'it must be an odd civilization in which poetry is not the equal of philosophy'" (116). This is a knockout essay!

This collection is a welcome addition to Stevens studies, helpful on many levels to students, teachers, and poetry readers alike. It brings to vivid life that charged moment in American poetry when the genius of Wallace Stevens began to exert a powerful influence on America's poets and artists.

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A Reader's Guide to Wallace Stevens.

By Eleanor Cook. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 2007.

Eleanor Cook's *A Reader's Guide to Wallace Stevens* is exactly what the title indicates, and this book will be a welcome resource for those who are beginning to study Wallace Stevens, who teach Stevens in basic literature classes, or who are focusing on a single poem or handful of poems. In her preface, Cook comments on the amount of Stevens-reading that takes place outside of the academy, as well as inside it, and notes that her guide is "for all these types of Stevens's readers—the knowledgeable, the studious, the enthusiastic, the occasional, the curious, the baffled but persistent" (ix). She perceives Stevens' project as, in essence, finding the "idiom that was his own, and of his own time and place. If he could do this, he would thereby create an American poetry" (10). Much of her reading of Stevens demonstrates the specific means by which Stevens created a poetry that was both American and local.

Cook's previous book on Stevens was addressed more to scholars; *Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War in Wallace Stevens* (Princeton, 1988) focused on the multiple meanings, imitative sounds, odd diction, and literary echoes that form such an important part of his work. She includes many comments on prosody and wordplay in this book too, and for the veteran Stevens reader, these may be the most enjoyable parts of the guide.

The book presents a chapter entitled "Biography," followed by discussions of each collection or group of poems in turn, and then of the specific poems in the collections. The first chapter is what one expects as biography, as it seems less concerned with the main events of Stevens' life than with the history of his mental phases and preoccupations, as they related not only to life events but also to what was happening in the world at that time. The following eight chapters present brief information about a collection or group of poems, and then give notes and interpretations for each. The series of chapters is headed "Glosses." The chapters themselves are *Harmonium*, *Ideas of Order*, *The Man with the Blue Guitar*, *Parts of a World*, *Transport to Summer*, *The Auroras of Autumn*, "The Rock," and *Late Poems*.

The notes to the individual poems focus on words and phrases, providing sources, translations of foreign phrases, etymologies, special connections Stevens may have had with a particular word, relationships between the poem and other Stevens poems that share a theme or image, and other relevant associations. The reader, of course, needs to have the poem in front of him while consulting the explanations. A lengthy appendix gives the author's perspective on how to read poetry in general and Stevens in particular. This essay is clear and useful to students, and it also gives other readers a sense of the principles that underlie Cook's way of reading the poems. There is little traditional apparatus—a short glossary of literary terms and a brief list of readings—but then more is not needed, as the book itself is a gloss. Discussions of individual poems begin with information about the first publication; this in itself is convenient to have without wide searching. The texts used are sometimes Library of America texts and not those from *Collected Poems*, when Cook finds the former more accurate or when the poem discussed is not in

Collected Poems. Some of the poems receive what prove to be detailed explications, while others do not. The brief explications are followed by notes.

The first work she glosses is the first poem in *Harmonium*, "Earthy Anecdote." She begins by noting its first publication in *Modern School* 5 and its subsequent publication with two other poems in *Others* 5; then she gives the placement in *Collected Poems* and the Library of America edition of Stevens' work. Her opening comments include reasons for the poem's placement at the beginning of his work, including its American flavor, and comments on previous interpretations of it. She mentions that Stevens said that there was no "symbolism" in the poem, but that it contained "a good deal of theory"; tongue in cheek, she explains the "theory" as what most of us would consider "symbolism." She identifies this poem as one of his initial poems that "focus on muse or genius loci figures that are both earthy and American" (30). Then, she discusses the earth invocation, the use of the anecdote form in this and other poems, and four particular words and phrases—"bucks," "clattering," "Over Oklahoma," and "firecat." The last shows some of her open method of interpretation: "'firecat': though an actual animal (L 209), mysterious and still resisting simple identification. (Minor Indian legends tell of a cougar or mountain lion who brings either helpful or destructive fire. Recent retellings use the word 'firecat.' . . .) Cf. the force of poetry or of the spirit as a lion or cat in . . . 'Poetry Is a Destructive Force'" (31).

Over the course of the analysis of Stevens' work, the notes contain many diverse reflections. Some of them refer to elements of Stevens' life—his wife's long hair, his enjoyment of skating in Elizabeth Park—as one source for his images. The personal connections add pleasure to the reading, providing glimpses of how life translates into art. Cook also makes judgments about which poems are lesser and greater, though these judgments may not have much to do with her explications. Exceptionally helpful are the references to other Stevens poems, which allow the reader to trace threads of motif in Stevens. "Thought tends to collect in pools," Stevens said, and this book helps the reader to follow its drift throughout his work.

The book does not take risks. Stevens' explanations and explications are allowed full authority, although not always sole authority. Some readers will want to say that Stevens was occasionally evasive if not deliberately misleading when responding to queries, particularly queries with an agenda. But his comments can always be used as a springboard, and Cook does not close off discussion with them. There are few books like this one; perhaps the closest match on Stevens would be Ronald Sukenick's *Musing the Obscure* (New York UP, 1967), a still-vital analysis. Sukenick provides close readings of a number of poems and brief takes on others. It is an interesting exercise to compare Cook's comments on any particular poem with Sukenick's—the older guide tends to be more didactic about meanings, and more startling with its suggestions. It also focuses almost entirely upon meaning, and does not do much with prosody and sound, which is where Cook's guide excels.

There is a demand for reference work on Stevens, as he is a major force in American literature, but his work has been evaded by many scholars, even Americanists. Although the format of Cook's book prevents it from being the

kind of book that invites the reader to curl up with it, *A Reader's Guide to Stevens* is a solid reference work that will help open doors for a wide variety of readers. It will be especially useful to instructors who are beginning to teach Stevens, providing them with sources, analogues, translations, and other materials that will help students connect with Stevens' work with ease and pleasure.

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A Natural History of Pragmatism: The Fact of Feeling from Jonathan Edwards to Gertrude Stein.

By Joan Richardson. Cambridge (England): Cambridge University Press, 2007.

The writing that constitutes Joan Richardson's genealogy of pragmatism—Jonathan Edwards, Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James, Henry James, Wallace Stevens, and Gertrude Stein—is evidence of mind thinking in time, pressured by the environment conceived in the broadest terms. The premise of Richardson's argument is that "both thinking and language are life forms, subject to the same laws as other life forms" (ix). Faced with the apparently inscrutable landscape of the New World, the Puritan practice of typological interpretation is compelled (following the Darwinian paradigm of imperfect replication and adaptation) to find new forms appropriate for survival in an unfamiliar place. Pressured also by the ongoing deterioration of the theological grounds for understanding human purpose from the mid-seventeenth century through to the middle of the twentieth, the simultaneous naturalization and secularization of belief-making mutates the attention to language characteristic of Puritan typology into a distinctive American aesthetics. This aesthetics retains its spiritual orientation toward an articulation of the meaning of meaning.

Compressed in this rudimentary way, the book's argument will be familiar to students of American literature, as is the list of writers chosen to demonstrate it. This is, however, to do injustice to what is in fact a remarkably nuanced and continuously revealing study. Indeed, the sense that we have heard it all before is in no small part the point of the book—remember William James's assertion that pragmatism is "old wine in new bottles"—which is to posit the persistence of a particular stance toward the world that is continuously renewed differently over time. What Richardson demonstrates in a series of finely calibrated readings is the way the history of thinking (literature, philosophy, science) is genetically encoded in the forms and tropes favored by her chosen writers. Structures, patterns, metaphors, and terms are repeated and transformed by current circumstances into something recognizable but at the same time irreducibly different from what came before. At each stage, new knowledge exerts pressure upon the writer to readdress conventional wisdom and adapt to the way things are now. So Edwards' reading of Locke

and Newton inflects his revitalized mission; Emerson's immersion in nineteenth-century natural philosophy, geology, and botany provides analogues for his naturalized theology; William James's encounter with Darwin and Helmholtz, among others, compels an interrogation of chance and the physiology of experience; Henry James's concern with the relation between time and perception mirrors trends in cognitive psychology; Stevens' Emersonian project is shot through with the new information provided by Einstein, Planck, Bohr, and Heisenberg; and Stein's medical and scientific background produces texts that echo developments in neurobiology.

Richardson's prose itself offers a model of what writing-as-thinking might look like. She explains, noting her own precursors—Stanley Cavell, Richard Poirier, and John Hollander—that her work is an “attempt is to honor their models in my manner and to practice the self-reflexive method of Pragmatism, incorporating into my sentences and paragraphs phrases, echoes, passages that provided and continue to provide the materials for the ‘room of the idea’ in which I have been able to imagine how this variety of intellectual experience came to be in the ongoing American experience” (xiii). Just as Emerson's essays and lectures “showed what sentences and paragraphs that mimic thinking as process look like” (8), so too does Richardson's prose seem to germinate out of itself, often in the space of a single sentence. Consider the following example:

A religion, a philosophy, capable of shifting from belief in a divinely determined order, progressing to an ultimate and just good, to belief in believing itself as the sole mechanism ordering the system inhabited and constituted by the language-using species we happen to be would have to instruct its practitioners repeatedly and in various ways in the fundamental law of this reality, this nature reconceived: that its process is not linear and teleological but stochastic and plural, and that the human mind is both contributing part and particle of this multiform process, itself the agent providing direction by selecting, at each instant, among the myriad possibilities scattered, one course of action. (151)

Just when you think it is over, the sentence gets a second wind and doubles on itself. Full of amendments and clarifications, the sentence explains what it is at the same time already doing: pursuing an idea in action. This sentence, although it comes from the chapter on Henry James, could apply to any of the writers in question, and indeed it provides a synopsis and an incarnation of the book's argument. It is, as Stevens would insist, “‘Part of the res itself and not about it’” (21).

Like reading Emerson, or Stein, or Stevens, part of the power of this kind of sentence is its incantatory effect. One has to enter the stream and be turned by it, both disoriented and reoriented by its insistence. This is what Edwards found in Newton, what Emerson and Darwin found useful in Milton, what William James found in Darwin, Stevens found in Emerson, and Stein found in William James. Reading such sinuous prose also demands exertion—survi-

vors of Henry James's late works will attest to this—as the text rejects the path of least resistance and forces deceleration so that the trail can be properly followed. Reading “in slow motion” (240) is precisely what Richardson is after, so that the complexity of experience can be fully registered.

One thing that becomes clear in Richardson's analysis is that the meaningful communication of scientific discoveries has periodically challenged scientists themselves to strain against linguistic convention and to attend to the structure of language much as poets do; as Neils Bohr observed: “‘When it comes to atoms, language can be used only as in poetry’ ” (206). In line with Richardson's conception of the pragmatic poet as a participant observer involved in the construction of belief out of the stuff of the world, she sees woven into Stevens' *oeuvre* “experiments mimicking an uncertain universe in uncertainties of predication and meaning” (22). Breaking down language becomes a mode of inquiry into the structure of sense, “a quizzing of all sounds, all words, all everything in the search for a momentary resting-place, a perch, specious, ‘a fiction,’ to catch onto” (22).

Part of the achievement of this excellent book is that it offers such a perch from which to follow the “moving structure” of the complex ideas braided together here. In an uncommon way for a work of serious scholarship, it manages to do creatively what it claims for its subjects: to perform the “binding [of] perception to the order of things” (11).

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The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry: Modernism and After.

By Charles Altieri. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006.

This book, by the well-known critic of modern and postmodern poetry and author of *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry* (significant for scholars of Stevens), is part of Blackwell's Introductions to Literature series. It has the noble aim of introducing literature to “readers of whatever kind,” which is nearly impossible. But that is no reason to avoid this book, for Altieri is thoroughly captivating, especially when his precise, synthetic, and innovative interpretations focus on beloved poets such as T. S. Eliot, Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, W. H. Auden, Elizabeth Bishop, and John Ashbery. His thesis is that Stevens and Auden are central to twentieth-century poetry because they initiate a new rhetorical poetry, after early modernists repudiated rhetoric, that opens poetic idioms to conversational and spectacular modalities. (My book on Stevens has a similar thesis about Stevens' rhetoric, but Altieri finds rhetoricity in different poems, plus, by including Auden and other poets, his book has a wider scope on the century.)

Altieri establishes his thesis with an overview of twentieth-century poetry that includes Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Mina Loy, George Oppen, Langston Hughes, Robert Lowell, Adrienne Rich, and Robert Creeley, in ad-

dition to the aforementioned favorites. The first three chapters analyze realism, imagism, and impersonality as modernist approaches that rail against rhetoric to register universal particulars. At first I was disappointed, especially with the introductory chapter, because it seemed too familiar. Since I generally dislike introductory chapters because they cannot illustrate what they profess (the same goes for reviews), and because the book's scope is introductory, I remained patient. My dismay was compounded by the editorial carelessness of several typos throughout. In terms of content, I found the second chapter's analysis of Pound basically setting the stage for a later clearing.

The Art of Twentieth-Century Poetry takes off with Eliot, innovatively read via Jacques Lacan, so that Eliot's impersonality links isolated, fractured psyches (which Eliot depicts with irony and sympathy at once) with vast cultural analysis. Altieri observes through an analysis of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and *The Waste Land* that Eliot's shattered spiritual quests portend geo-political and religious cross-currents, then and now. Interpretations of Loy and Moore's poetry also demonstrate impersonality as a bridge for cultural communication. Always in line with the epistemologies of literature, Altieri's bridges span vast spaces; a particularly imaginative, detailed reading of Moore's "Steeple-Jack" links her impersonal voice with the more populist rhetorics to come: "Like Stevens and Auden, she explores ways of actualizing an imaginary domain of identifications while resisting the structure of identification vilified by Eliot, Pound, Williams, and Loy" (92). Altieri argues that in the 1930s the poetry of Moore, Williams, Oppen, and Hughes learned lessons from early modernism's limited realism and the righteous conservation of European culture. Williams turns away from his early failure to draw " 'many broken things into a dance giving them thus a full being' " (99).

Altieri observes Stevens' refusal to reprint his long poem on the Depression, *Owl's Clover*, along similar lines: "he thought the work was too direct and too moralistic in invoking a collective identity, without a sufficient ironic distance and speculative self-questioning" (104). Here I disagree; I do not think many readers find Stevens' poem too direct; it is potentially moralistic if one takes the collective rhetoric to heart rather than see it as a provisional dream-utopia in line with 1930s politics. Marianne Moore, in her 1936 *Poetry* essay, "Conjurings That Endure," argues that *Owl's Clover* ironized the rhetoric of the time with spellbinding dramatizations of language built to last. Moore makes claims about *Owl's Clover* similar to those that Altieri makes for Stevens' "The Idea of Order at Key West": "at once celebrating effulgent rhetorical gestures and seeking to overcome the invitation to imaginary identity that rhetoric offers by securing through the poem's action a collective sense of the needs it may satisfy" (133). The "erotic cauldron" (173) Charles Berger described in the Fall 2006 issue of the *Wallace Stevens Journal* is, Altieri emphasizes, transformed from the private Wordsworthian sublime to a discussion of community value with Ramon Fernandez, the co-reader. Altieri develops collectivity in Stevens' poetry of the 1940s through ways in which rhetorical statements gain relation (through "as") and finally exponential power through intense quickenings willfully embodied through abstract characters. The rhetoric of the innovatively chosen "Poem with Rhythms" dramatizes shared experience,

asking readers to feel the mind and body in concert. Late Stevens poems such as "The Plain Sense of Things" dispense with figural sensation in favor of viewing discursive language as it engages people with the world. Altieri cites "The Snow Man," with its circuitous sentence of imaginative involvement, to contrast the late poetry's emphasis on a bare world with plain absences checking the projected presences. By tracking Stevens' course, Altieri illuminates what John Ashbery, and to some extent Elizabeth Bishop, learn, practice, and extend.

Langston Hughes and George Oppen provided alternatives to rhetorically wrought poetry. The concisely measured images and speech still offer rhetorical positions. However, where Stevens and other modernists tended toward excess, Hughes and Oppen render lean, oppositional verse to identify political oppression. These poets are therefore far from Stevens but close to Auden in his playful dramatizations of identities that are prone to the social pressures of mainstream rhetoric. Altieri cites Auden's 1932 long poem, *The Orators*, to criticize the status of public rhetoric, and the 1955 poem, "Homage to Clio," to embrace the unknowable quality of history as an antidote to traditional modernism. Auden "could play two different aspects of rhetoric against one another—the effort to foster positive identifications against the effort to establish the sense of potential community founded on need rather than on projections of power" (153). Clio performs in a space where social significations struggle to survive. Altieri's projection of Auden as rhetorical exemplar culminates with an analysis of "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," written in 1939, the year Auden moved to the United States. By imagining through Yeats, Auden situates the responsibility of the poet listening to history's demands and voicing reply.

In this book, Altieri uses a casual tone to admit the limitations of choosing, discussing, and generalizing so much poetry. Although the caveats are necessary, there is great pleasure if the reader happens to agree with generalizations about postmodernist poetry: "Lowell and Rich offer surprising ways to personalize the new realism; Creeley develops what I call a 'conative poetics' in order to transform Williams' objectivism into a mode for dealing with subjective intimacies; Bishop creates dazzling syntheses of Moore, Williams, and Stevens [and Auden!]; and Ashbery gives Auden's performative rhetoric a deliciously Stevensian cast" (157).

Altieri chooses these poets because he likes them and because they counter stifling New Critical orthodoxies. Discussions of Bishop and Ashbery are especially lucid. Altieri pinpoints Bishop's *Questions of Travel* as the volume in which positionality supersedes imaginary self-identifications. This shift from modern ego (present in Lowell, for instance) to the postmodern questioning of authorial perspective enables "other people and the entire world of nature—a significant and mobile existence" (193). The poet as tourist is against mastery (as Jeffrey Gray argues in *Mastery's End: Travel and Postwar American Poetry*) and therefore decenters the very Western values that bring the poet there to stand perplexed. Likewise, Ashbery takes the ego in *Self-Portrait with a Convex Mirror* and reflects back instead the much grander spectacle of the multifarious world. Stevens, to paraphrase Altieri, supplies the luscious in-

tricacies of a shaping imagination, while Auden's humor and humility enable Ashbery to remain behind the camera and not enter the fictional projection. Ashbery's spectacles utilize the rhetorics of Stevens and Auden to call and respond in poems such as "Ut Pictura Poesis" and "As We Know." Altieri ends the book debating whether Ashbery is the best example of articulating present consciousness in poetry, or whether he is insufficient for younger contemporary poets wrestling with the register of cataclysmic global change.

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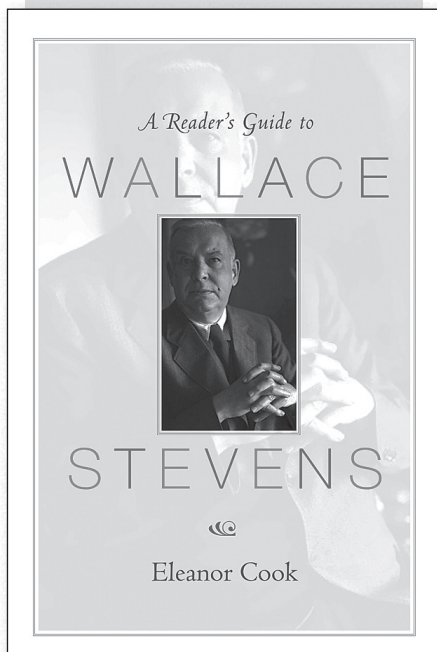
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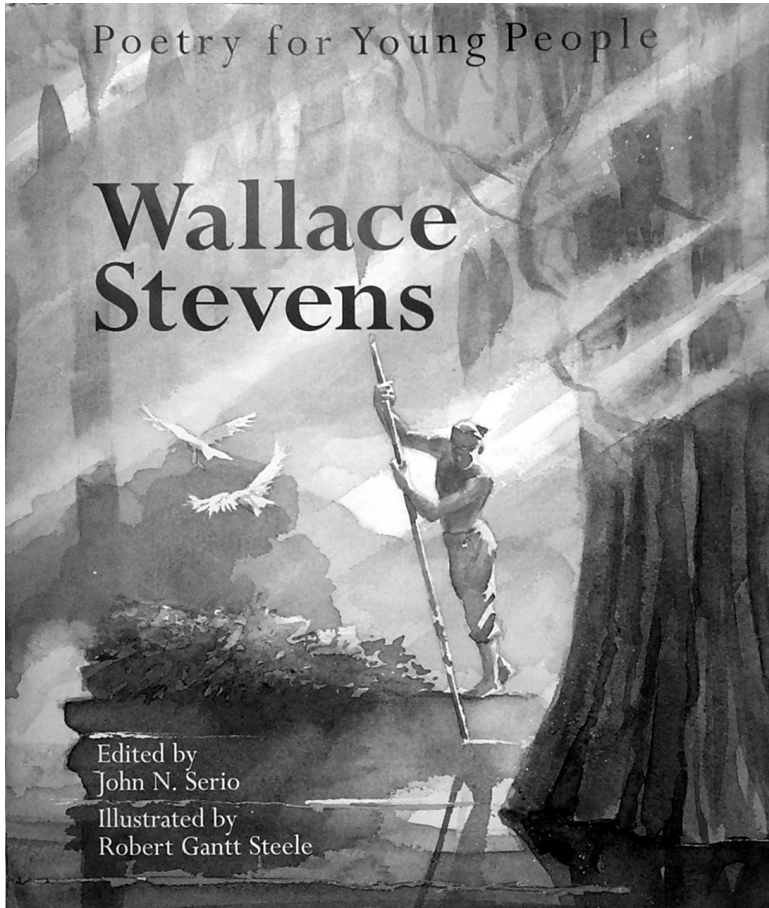
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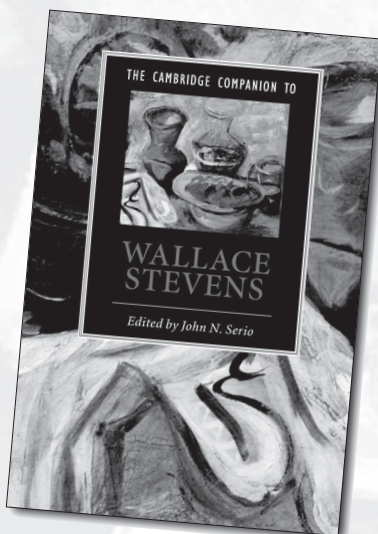
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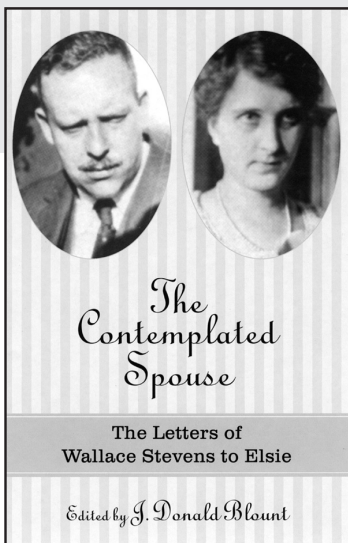
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