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Companions in Disguise: The Conjuries of Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore

BETHANY HICOK

IN 1937 MARIANNE MOORE reviewed Wallace Stevens’ Ideas of Order and Owl’s Clover for Poetry magazine. In the middle of the review, which is titled “Conjures That Endure,” Moore refers, rather obscurely, to one of the myths of Jupiter and Mercury, in which the two gods test the hospitality of the people of Phrygia. They dress as beggars and travel from house to house. No one will admit them, except for a poor, old couple, who treat these so-called beggars as if they were gods. The old couple are, of course, richly rewarded for their trouble. Moore writes that Stevens’ “method of hints and disguises should have Mercury as consultant-magician, for in the guise of ‘a dark rabbi,’ an ogre, a traveler, a comedian, an old woman, he deceives us as the god misled the aged couple of the myth” (CPr 348). In other words, Stevens’ deception reveals a greater good. Moore writes, “in each clime the author visits, and under each disguise, the dilemma of tested hope confronts him” (CPr 349). In Moore’s metaphor, Stevens comes to his readers in a variety of perplexing and intentionally “misleading” guises. Only by having the kindness and courage to take him in all his various forms will they discover his true genius.

The claim that Moore makes here for Stevens as a poet committed to testing the world’s tolerance could as easily be made of her own method in the 1930s as she re-inserted herself into the poetry scene, and, in a variety of guises—the hero, the student, the zebra swallowtail of “Half Deity,” the jerboa, the pangolin, the plumet basilisk—imagined a world where hope for the world lay in inclusion, not exclusion. Claiming a fellowship with Stevens, Moore uses this myth as a metaphor not only for Stevens’ poetry but for their relationship as well. Moore herself seems to be in disguise, hinting that she is willing to take on the role of the quicksilver Mercury to Stevens’ Jupiter.

Moore’s review of Stevens hints at what she made obvious in private correspondence in August 1935, when she wrote to her friend Winifred Ellerman, known as Bryher, that “all my efforts in writing criticism and in writing verse [have] been for years... a chameleon attempt to bring my product into some sort of compatibility with Wallace Stevens” (SL
In a September 1935 letter to the poet and editor T. C. Wilson, Moore writes, “my efforts in writing . . . could be but an attempt to approximate consanguinity with Wallace Stevens, either his prose or verse” (SL 354). “Consanguinity” seems an extraordinary word for this poet to be using about another poet, especially one who seems on the surface to be so different from Moore. Throughout the 1930s, however, Moore moves beyond a generalized sense of affinity with Stevens to claim an ancestral bond and a blood relationship. In her reviews and letters during the 1930s, Moore establishes both a mythic and ancestral link with, as she calls Stevens in her 1937 review, “America’s chief conjurer” (CPr 347).

Stevens might even be said to have suggested such a role in his own review of Moore in 1935, “A Poet That Matters,” in which he stated that “poetry for her is ‘a place for the genuine.’” Stevens’ interpretation of this line from one of Moore’s most famous poems is telling. He writes that Moore’s poetry makes clear that “we want to understand. We want, as she says, ‘imaginary gardens with real toads in them’” (779). As companions (or perhaps one should say conjurers) in disguise, both poets face in their poetry of the 1930s the “dilemma of tested hope” and the problem of what poetry should be at a time when, as Stevens tells us in “Academic Discourse at Havana,” “Politic man ordained / Imagination as the fateful sin” (116). It was a time “of universal poverty,” as Stevens writes in “Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery,” not a time of universal poetry, where “The chrysanthemums’ astringent fragrance comes / Each year to disguise the clanking mechanism / Of machine within machine within machine” (122; 127). In the politically serious, somber 1930s, dominated by gritty realism, both Stevens and Moore recognized the need for disguise. Indeed, disguise, according to these poets, was not inappropriate for dealing with political crisis. Disguise was not the opposite of sincerity, nor was sincerity innocuous. As Stevens said of Moore, “People with a passion for the truth are always original” (780).

Once one begins to follow the gossamer threads of this “web of friendship,” as Robin Schulze has so aptly named it, one finds connections everywhere, and the effect is a call and response between the two poets across their poetry and reviews of the 1930s, leading to one of the most interesting poetic partnerships of the age. As Alan Filreis has argued, “when literary-political lines were drawn, [Moore] deemed Stevens and herself an aesthetic pair in reaction against a newly dominant mode” (169) of social realist verse. In “Sailing After Lunch,” for example, from the 1936 Ideas of Order, Stevens presents what he himself called, in a letter to the editor and publisher J. Ronald Lane Latimer, “a temporary theory of poetry” (L 277), or as Schulze puts it, “a program for a new and better romantic poetry” (102). The third stanza begins,

Mon Dieu, hear the poet’s prayer.
The romantic should be here.
The romantic should be there.  
It ought to be everywhere.  
But the romantic must never remain,  

Mon Dieu, and must never again return. (99)

Moore read “Sailing After Lunch” during a poetry reading at Bryn Mawr, she told William Carlos Williams in a June 1935 letter (SL 345). In October of that same year, her poem “Smooth Gnarled Crape Myrtle” appeared in The New English Weekly; it is a poem where Moore, too, worries about art’s potential deceptions. “Art,” the poem strikingly claims, “is unfortunate” (POV 16). Yet, as she told Williams in a January 1934 letter, art may be “catnip,” but it nevertheless “does seem worth the martyrdom of pursuit” (SL 318). “Smooth Gnarled Crape Myrtle” begins with Moore’s description of an emblematic gathering of birds that are, in a sense, practicing the art of deception. “A brass-green bird with a grass- / green throat” is “copying the / Chinese flower piece” (POV 15) that serves as his perch. But in this gathering of deceptive plumage, the speaker echoes Stevens’ lines, “The romantic should be here.” Considering her grouping of birds, Moore reflects: “‘The legendary white- / eared black bulbul that sings / only in pure Sanskrit’ should / be here—” (POV 15). Moore’s notes to the poem tell us in embedded quotations (Moore quotes someone who is quoting someone else) that the white-eared black bulbul is “‘the legendary nightingale of Persia’” that “‘sings eternally in the . . . pure heroic Sanskrit of the ancient poets’” (POV 23–24). Moore’s metonymy of the “white-eared black bulbul” for Stevens’ “romantic” suggests the richly associative link between the poets in the mid-1930s and reveals Moore’s own developing theory of poetry. In Moore’s verse of the 1930s, the nightingale of the romantics becomes the less melodious but nicely alliterative “black bulbul.”

Birds abound in Moore’s poetry of this period, and the trope functions as a kind of answer to Stevens’ own search for substitutes for the romantic nightingale. Indeed, Schulze argues that Moore’s “Frigate Pelican” is an homage to Stevens. Moore turned back to Stevens, Schulze observes, in order to justify the flights of the imagination that the social realist poets of the time seemed determined to reject. Moore’s œuvre of the period contains the “brass-green bird,” the frigate pelican, the “redcoated” redbird of “Virginia Britannia,” the fierce mother bird of “Bird-Witted,” and the pigeons of Moore’s 1935 poem of that name. As early as 1932, Moore crafted the swan of “No Swan So Fine.” She published that poem in Poetry, and her portrait of the swan, too, shares something of Stevens’ various substitutions for nightingales in his poem “Academic Discourse at Havana”: “Canaries in the morning, orchestras / In the afternoon, balloons at night. That is / A difference, at least, from nightingales, / Jehovah and the great sea-worm” (115). “Academic Discourse at Havana” was first published as
“Discourse in a Cantina at Havana” in Broom in 1923 and then reprinted in 1929 under its later title in Hound & Horn, a magazine that Moore read regularly. Stevens’ poem might well have been fresh in her mind when she turned to her swan, which seems to be a particular instance of the more generalized cipher of Stevens’ swans in canto III of “Academic Discourse,” those swans that “arrayed / The twilights of the mythy goober khan” (115) and mark his desire to move beyond well-worn romantic tropes. In Moore’s poem, however, the swan described is made of china, “lodged” in a Louis XV candelabra. The moral center of the poem rests in the fact that the china swan wears a “toothed gold / collar,” which is meant “to show whose bird it was” (“No Swan So Fine” 7). Moore’s image invokes W. B. Yeats’s “The Wild Swans at Coole.” Moore’s poem begins (after the title as first line) with a quotation: “ ‘No water so still as the / dead fountains of Versailles,’ ” which echoes the opening of Yeats’s poem where “the water / Mirrors a still sky” and later the swans “drift on the still water, / Mysterious, beautiful” (131). Moore’s porcelain swan, fixed and collared, an emblem of the French monarchy, stands as not only a challenge to Yeats’s romantic nostalgia and dark brooding over what is lost, but also as a sharp contrast to the wildness of the living swan that appears in the poem’s second stanza. Once again, with Stevens as guide, Moore attempts to reclaim and revise the romantic and create a usable past. Moore may also have been thinking of “Autumn Refrain,” also published in Hound & Horn in 1932, where amid the “skreak and skritter” of “grackles,” Stevens declares that the nightingale is “not a bird for me” (129).

Both poets in the 1930s also worried over the fate of the individual and of the poetic imagination in the face of the rise of the “masses” on the left and of fascism on the right. Stevens’ most famous encounter with the left came in 1935 in a well-documented incident when Stanley Burnshaw reviewed Ideas of Order for New Masses. Although Burnshaw was a relatively astute and nuanced reader of Stevens, he was nevertheless obliged to drive home the point that Marxism was the only hope for the world, and he occasionally expressed exasperation that Stevens did not make his “idea of order” clearer and less “contradictory” (41–42). He was particularly disturbed by Stevens’ tendency to turn to the “self” for help, even though his turn was at times, as Burnshaw notes, balanced by “self-mockery,” as in these opening lines from “Botanist on Alp (No. 1)”:

Panoramas are not what they used to be.
Claude has been dead a long time
And apostrophes are forbidden on the funicular.
Marx has ruined Nature,
For the moment. (109)

Burnshaw quotes the last two lines in his review, and the review prompted a series of philosophical musings from Stevens in letters to Ronald Latimer.
and culminated in the poems of *Owl’s Clover*. In one oft-quoted letter, Stevens writes, “I hope I am headed left, but there are lefts and lefts, and certainly I am not headed for the ghastly left of MASSES” (*L* 286).

Moore, in turn, worried specifically over Ezra Pound’s “Hitlerlike fanaticism” and his “willingness . . . to interfere with individuality” (*SL* 313, 344). At the end of “Conjuries That Endure,” Moore writes that she sees in Stevens’ verse a challenge to fixed ideas of order (on either the right or the left) and the decade’s tendency to commemorate and monumentalize leaders and hollow victories. Moore writes that Stevens is a poet who “hates [the] lust for power and [the] ignorance of power,” and concludes: “So long as we are ashamed of the ironic feast, and of our marble victories—horses or men—which will break unless they are first broken by us, there is hope for the world” (*CPr* 349). In her opinion, both she and Stevens are engaged in what Moore terms in her review the “search for that which will endure,” a principle that cannot be found in “marble victories” but which, in resisting restrictive ideologies, is far more elusive and fluid (*CPr* 348).

Throughout their poetic conversation of the 1930s, Moore and Stevens appreciate each other’s elusiveness. In his review of Moore’s *Selected Poems* in 1935, Stevens states that Moore “leans to the romantic,” but Stevens means the romantic “with a difference” (777). Central to Stevens’ reading of Moore and his concept of the new romantic is his idea of hybridity. If she proceeded by positive statement, Stevens tells us, she would be a romantic “in the sense in which the romantic is a relic of the imagination” (777). However, Moore “hybridises the thing by a negative,” so in her poem “The Steeple Jack” there “are no banyans, frangipani nor / jack-fruit trees; nor an exotic serpent / life” (777). In creating landscapes that imply their very negation, Moore refuses to ascribe to any one, static vision of the world. Moore also “hybridises [a thing] by association,” Stevens tells us, so that she does not just give us “moon-vines,” which would be “tedious,” but rather “moon-vines trained on fishing-twine,” which “are something else” altogether. Stevens states that Moore “demands the romantic that is genuine, that is living, the enriching poetic reality” (777, 779).

One has only to think of how Moore uses the negative and metonymy in the 1933 “The Plumet Basilisk” to know what Stevens means. Moore tells us, “No anonymous / nightingale sings in a swamp” (33) in Costa Rica; rather, we find the basilisk, whose method is disguise. The basilisk’s coloring is such that he is camouflaged. Moore describes the lizard in this way: “By the Chinese / brush, eight green / bands are painted on / the tail—as piano-keys are barred / by five black strokes across the white. This octave of faulty / decorum, hides the extraordinary lizard / till nightfall” (31–32). So well camouflaged is he, in fact, that the conquering Spaniards “failed to see” him (33). His deception is his strength, Moore tells us, for the basilisk is at once “the innocent, rare, gold- / defending dragon, that as you look, begins to be a / nervous naked sword on little feet, with
three-fold / separate flame above the hilt, inhabiting fringe equidistant / from itself, of white / fire eating into air” (33). Stevens echoes this passage in both method and sense in the second stanza of his 1934 poem “Evening Without Angels”:

Air is air.
Its vacancy glitters round us everywhere.
Its sounds are not angelic syllables
But our unfashioned spirits realized
More sharply in more furious selves. (111)

Stevens offers us the abstraction, while Moore gives us a series of concrete images of what shape these “more furious selves” might take. Unlike the nightingale, the plumet basilisk flickers through a series of indefinite and changing forms. Unfettered by any one vision of romantic form, the plumet basilisk is free to become “white fire” that feeds on air, a “furious” self that is at once indistinct and, paradoxically, “more sharply” defined.

As Schulze has noted, the mid-1930s was a time of “intellectual accord” for Moore and Stevens (154), and this is indeed what we see in Moore’s extraordinary poetry of this period when she is most like Mercury to Stevens’ Jupiter. Both poets, I think, gain strength through careful attention to their call and response. When Stevens worries in “A Fading of the Sun” that “The warm antiquity of self, / Everyone, grows suddenly cold” (113), Moore seems to reassure him with the end of the 1936 “The Pangolin,” as she offers this description of the animal:

Consistent with the
formula—warm blood, no gills,
two pairs of hands and a few hairs—that
is a mammal; there he sits in his
own habitat, serge-clad, strong-shod.
The prey of fear; he, always
curtailed, extinguished,
thwarted by the dusk, work partly done,
says to the alternating blaze,
‘Again the sun!
anew each
day; and new and new and new,
that comes into and steadies my soul.’ (POV 21)

Moore makes clear in her reviews of Stevens that she saw him as a poet who struggled to make meaning in the world and who valued that struggle. At the end of “The Pangolin,” however, she reminds us that the imaginative sun that Stevens laments as “fading” will keep returning. The repetition of “anew . . . and new and new and new” answers Stevens’ repetition
as he considered the value of poetry in “Gallant Chateau.” Is it just “a few words tuned / And tuned and tuned and tuned” (130)? The act of making, while never final, is always in some way renewing.

“The Pangolin” is the final poem in Moore’s stunning 1936 volume of poetry named for that heroic animal, The Pangolin and Other Verse, a volume that as a whole furthers the conversation between the two poets and marks a deepening of Moore’s commitment to Stevens’ “new romantic.” As I have already suggested, “Smooth Gnarled Crape Myrtle,” which is included in that volume, responds quite directly to lines in Stevens. The Pangolin collects a group of poems that Moore published in little magazines between January 1935 and January 1936 into a sequence called “The Old Dominion,” which includes “Virginia Britannia,” “Bird-Witted,” Half Deity,” and “Smooth Gnarled Crape Myrtle.” The long title poem, “The Pangolin,” completes the volume.

“The Old Dominion” sequence opens with “Virginia Britannia,” Moore’s lengthy meditation on the South’s beauty, as well as its history of violence and slavery. In its long, descriptive, musical passages, Moore’s poem comes close to matching the music that she had admired in Stevens: “Pale sand edges England’s old / dominion. The air is soft, warm, hot, / above the cedar-dotted emerald shore” (POV 3). In Moore’s hands, however, the Stevensian music she borrows serves to strengthen the poem’s critique. Moore reminds her readers of the seductions of the South even as she reveals its arrogance. Considering what the “rattlesnake soon / said”—“‘don’t tread on / me,’” the motto of the south’s “dashingly / undiffident first flag,” Moore describes it as a “tactless symbol of a new republic” (POV 7). Moore links the South’s tyranny to global tyranny through a strategy of negation. Here is an example from “Virginia Britannia”:

The strangler fig, the dwarf-fancying Egyptian, the American,
the Dutch, the noble
Roman, in taking what they
pleased—colonizing as we say—
were not all intellect and delicacy. A
black savage or such
as was subject to the
deer-fur Crown is not all brawn
and animality. . . . (POV 8)

Moore’s strategy here exemplifies Cristanne Miller’s assessment of negation in Moore as a “directly political attempt to overthrow widespread hierarchical stereotypes” (807–08). But it is the ending of “Virginia Britannia” that most pays tribute to Stevens. At the end of the poem, Moore
offers a Whitmanesque image of “the live oak’s rounded / mass of undu-
lating boughs” that contains a Wordsworthian echo:

and the redundantly wind-
widened clouds expanding to
earth size above the
town’s bothered with wages
childish sages,
are to the child an intimation of
what glory is. (POV 9)

The insertion of the reality principle—“above the / town’s bothered with wages / childish sages”—challenges any idea that Moore might be favoring only the poetic imagination. But her uncharacteristic Wordsworthian turn seems to be inspired by her reading of Stevens during these years and their intense debate over issues of poetry and politics. Moore seems to be initiating a “fresh romantic,” perhaps authorized by Stevens’ struggle, in more overt ways in these poems.

This more obvious turn back to the romantic lyric is especially true of Moore’s little-known poem in this sequence, “Half Deity.” The relative obscurity of this poem is unfortunate, as it is a powerful statement of artistic survival and renewal, inspired, at least in part, by Stevens. The poem was first published in Direction in early 1935, then republished in 1936 in The Pangolin, with a few changes, and then finally, revised again, it appeared in Moore’s 1941 volume What Are Years. Moore chose not to include it in The Complete Poems.

The poet is Moore’s own “Ode to Psyche,” and she revises both Keats and Shelley. John Slatin is right to claim that in this Keatsian imitation, “the landscape of ‘The Old Dominion’ has suddenly become . . . thoroughly Romantic” (238). Moore made the poem’s ode-like qualities more evident in the stanza breaks she inserted into the What Are Years version, but obscured the reference to Psyche in that revision, calling her simply “a nymph.” The swallowtail, the half deity or demi-god of Moore’s poem, is a symbol for hope in its humble beginnings, and its survival depends on our own willingness to spare it. The poem begins with Moore’s characteristic use of the title as first line:

Half Deity

half worm. We all, infant and adult, have
stopped to watch the butterfly—last of the
elves—and learned to spare the wingless worm
that hopefully ascends the tree. The well-known
silk tiger swallowtail
of South America, with body light-
ly furred was that bearing pigments which engrave the lower wings with dragon’s blood, weightless.
They that have wings must not have weights.

(POV 12)

The butterfly, like the plumet basilisk, the frigate pelican, and the pangolin, is another figure for the poet. Moore’s strategy is to draw the reader into the natural and aesthetic world of the swallowtail, so that “we all” participate in “spar[ing]” the “wingless worm” and delighting in the hope offered by this companion in disguise. If the reader accepts the caterpillar, the deception will yield a butterfly. As in the myth of Jupiter and Mercury, the “deity” of the visitor will only emerge through a hopeful engagement with his trickery. As in so many of her poems of the 1930s, Moore’s precise observations create artistic possibilities. The pigments of the butterfly’s wing “engrave / the lower wings with dragon’s blood.” Moore’s artistic signature shares its precision and coloration with Albrecht Dürer, whose work she invokes in “The Steeple-Jack.” In Moore’s simultaneous celebration of the poet’s uniqueness and inclusiveness in this appeal to the reader, I am again reminded of Stevens, who said of the poet in “Academic Discourse at Havana,” “As part of nature he is part of us. / His rareties are ours: may they be fit / And reconcile us to our selves in those / True reconcilings, dark, pacific words, / And the adroit harmonies of their fall” (116–17).

Throughout the poem, the butterfly’s qualities are strikingly similar to ones that were ascribed to Moore herself: “Twig-veined irascible / fastidious stubborn undisciplined / zebra!” (POV 13). Stevens himself applied the word “fastidious” to Moore in his 1935 review, and Moore’s use of the term in her portrait of the poet suggests that she had Stevens in mind.¹⁰ The butterfly’s role as a figure for the poet is further suggested in Moore’s echo of these lines from Keats’s “Ode to Psyche”: “I wander’d in a forest thoughtlessly.” Moore echoes Keats’s line in her description of the butterfly: “The blind / all-seeing butterfly . . . / wanders, as though it were ignorant” (POV 13).

Moore’s demi-ode to artistic freedom, however, gives us a very different Psyche than Keats’s ode. Moore focuses on Psyche’s curiosity rather than her relationship with Cupid, a curiosity that in the myth of “Cupid and Psyche” gets her into trouble. Psyche is, in fact, in hot pursuit of the butterfly throughout the first half of the poem, as, “Disguised in butterfly- / bush Wedgwood-blue, Psyche follows it / to that small tree, Micro-
malus, the midget / crab; to the mimosa; / and from that, to the flowering pomegranate” (POV 12). It is no accident, I believe, that the flowers on which the butterfly feeds are all hermaphroditic, emphasizing the butterfly’s (and the artist’s) androgynous qualities. The butterfly, in turn, is “Vexed because curiosity has / been pursuing it” (POV 13).
As in Keats’s “Ode to Psyche” and Stevens’ “The Idea of Order at Key West,” Moore’s poet is also an observer of the scene, a point made clearer in the 1941 revision of the poem. In the 1936 version, the butterfly’s “yellowness . . . has been observed. / Disguised in butterfly- / bush Wedgwood-blue, Psyche follows it” (POV 12). In the revision, the lines read, “Its yellowness / . . . has just / now been observed. A nymph approaches, dressed / in Wedgwood blue, tries to touch it and / must follow” (WAY 17). The separation between the speaker and Psyche is more pronounced in the second version. One of the projects of this poem, however, is to confuse the various identities offered. Psyche, after all, is the Greek word for butterfly, as well as soul, and the myth of Cupid and Psyche, on which Moore draws, can be read as an allegory for the soul’s transformation after much trial and suffering. Moore’s confusion of identities calls on those hybridizing tendencies again that Stevens noted in her work. It also means, as Slatin has suggested, that Moore implicates herself in Psyche’s desire to pursue and possess the butterfly, which results in the poet “straining after” her own soul, as it were (244).

Psyche’s (and by extension the poet’s) pursuit of the butterfly leads to the poem’s central image, when Psyche comes face to face with the butterfly:

The butterfly’s round unglazed china eyes,
pale tobacco brown, with the large eyes of
the Nymph on them—gray eyes that now are
black, for she with controlled agitated glance
observes the insect’s face
and all’s a-quiver with significance—
 enact the scene of cats’ eyes on the magpie’s eyes, by Goya. Butterflies do not need home advice. (POV 13)

The painting to which Moore refers is Francisco de Goya’s Don Manuel Osorio de Manrique Zuñiga. Goya, who was of course himself a social critic, strengthens the poem’s critique, allowing Moore to extend her argument beyond a claim for personal liberty to encompass a larger realm of social violence, coercion, and enslavement, just as she had with “Virginia Britannia.” Although art may be “deception,” as she tells us in “Smooth Gnarled Crape Myrtle,” morally engaged art can deceive in ways that point toward a greater good.

The painting, which hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, portrays the obviously rich and privileged son of the Condé de Altamira. Goya had been named court painter to Charles III in 1786, and Don Manuel Osorio de Manrique Zuñiga is one of a series of paintings commissioned by the Altamiras, probably in the 1790s. The painting features a young boy (Don Manuel) dressed in an elegant red costume with ruffled collar. In his hand is a leash connected to his pet magpie’s leg. The magpie holds the
painter’s calling card in its beak. On the child’s left is a gilded cage containing several finches, and on his right are the three cats watching the magpie intently. Moore’s use of the painting in “Half Deity” and in “The Old Dominion” sequence generally suggests that she read this painting as a complicated allegory of enslavement and potential violence. Goya’s portrait also speaks to the artist’s entrapment in a system of privilege and patronage, which supported the artist but curtailed his freedom. In his refusal to idealize his royal subjects, Goya, however, maintained some degree of artistic freedom. Moore further exemplifies the artist’s independence in the repetition of the word “eyes” (also the lyric eye/I of the poet’s vision), which appears five times in nine lines—“china eyes,” “large eyes,” “gray eyes,” “cats’ eyes,” and “magpie’s / eyes.” The last eyes in the series belong to the magpie. Moore employs a line break to separate them out, so that the line begins, “eyes, by Goya,” emphasizing artistic agency and independence.

Moore’s butterfly finally escapes Psyche’s pursuit and “flies, drunken with triviality / or guided by visions of strength, off until, / diminishing like wreckage on the sea, / rising and falling easily, it mounts / the swell and keeping its true course with / what swift majesty, indifferent to us, is gone” (POV 13–14). The poet cannot be pursued or forced; the artist requires a certain distance in order to create an “indifferen[ce].” The poet must maintain his or her “true course.” Moore emphasizes the butterfly’s separateness and uniqueness: “off” is separated from the verb “flies.” The butterfly is indifferent to “us,” separate from “us,” gone. These are qualities she admired in Stevens: “In America,” she writes in her review of him, “where the dearth of rareness is conspicuous, those who recognize it feel compelled to acknowledgment” (CPr 331).

The butterfly vanishes here only to be found again in the next line, much like the artistic process itself, leading us into the final movement of the poem, where Moore reveals the full extent of her collaboration with Stevens in the making of a new romantic. It is where Moore most becomes, I think, the romantic “with a difference,” embracing some aspects of romanticism while rejecting others. What the poem rejects is important. Although the swallowtail is “deaf to approval”—an important prescription for artistic freedom, especially given what Stevens and Moore felt were onerous demands on the artist to write to the constricting requirements of the age—the swallowtail does have its ears tuned to something:

It has strict ears when the West Wind speaks. It was he, with mirror eyes of strong anxiety, who had no net or flowering shrewd-scented tropical device, or lignum vitae perch in half-shut hand; for ours is not a canely land; nor was it Oberon, but this quiet young man with piano replies,
named Zephyr, whose hand spread out was enough
to tempt the fiery tiger-horse to stand,
eyes staring skyward and chest arching
bravely out—historic metamorphoser
and saintly animal
in India, in Egypt, anywhere.
His talk was as strange as my grandmother’s muff. (POV 14)

Moore’s Zephyr is decidedly not the violent West Wind of Shelley’s
great ode but “this quiet young man with piano replies.” Shelley’s poet
demands to be ravaged by the wind, so that it may “Drive my dead
thoughts over the universe / Like withered leaves to quicken in a new
birth!” “Half Deity,” like “Ode to the West Wind,” is about poetic sur-
vival, but Moore’s inquiry into the source of inspiration and imagination
does not depend on violence and the poet’s enslavement to a higher, greater
power, whatever that power might be. Rather, inspiration here depends
on a reciprocal call and response between the butterfly and the wind (or
one poet and another) that is freely given and freely accepted. In Shelley’s
ode, the poet “pants” beneath the wind’s power. Moore displaces the pant-
ing poet onto Psyche earlier in the poem as she pursues the butterfly, for
she is “forced by the hot hot sun to pant” (POV 13). As if to emphasize the
stark differences between her romanticism and Shelley’s, Moore earlier in
the poem humorously includes that apostrophe Stevens had said was “for-
bidden on the funicular.” Moore’s apostrophe, however, is not one drawn
from Shelley or Keats (“O wild West Wind,” “O Goddess!”), but rather
one contained in the butterfly’s very anatomy—in his “apostrophe- /
tipped brown antennae“ (POV 13).

Moreover, Zephyr is also not Oberon, king over all the fairies (the swallowtail is described as “last of the elves” at the beginning of the poem), but rather a companion who aids the butterfly in getting from place to place. He does not hinder or entrap it with a net or tropical flowers. In the end, Moore, like Stevens, refuses to become the lyric poet who menun-
metalizes her artistic progeny. Rather than building a temple to Psyche (or, in
this case, the butterfly) as Keats does, freezing it “in some untrodden re-
gion of my mind,” Moore offers us a different portrait of heroism, the
heroic image of the butterfly, independent with its “eyes staring skyward
and chest arching / bravely out,” this “historic metamorphoser / and
saintly animal.” No longer simply a product of the imagination, the but-
terfly is part of history.

There is a further stunning series of convergences between Moore’s work
and Stevens’ that the final movement of “Half Deity” invokes. The swallowtail’s ears are tuned to Zephyr’s “piano replies,” which brings to
mind a series of poems from Ideas of Order—“Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz,”
“Anglais Mort à Florence,” and particularly “Mozart, 1935.” All these
poems are concerned with what to do when the poet’s “music began to
fail him,” or when “too many waltzes have ended,” and “the epic of disbelief / . . . will soon be constant,” but each one ends with the idea that something might be salvaged from the music of the past. Moore quotes the end of “Anglais Mort à Florence” in her 1935 review, calling Stevens’ Ideas of Order “the unembarrassing souvenirs of a man and ‘ . . . the time when he stood alone, / When to be and delight to be seemed to be one’” (CP 329).

In “Mozart, 1935,” Stevens admonishes his “poet” to “be seated at the piano” and to “play the present,” telling him in mock lyric apostrophe to “Be thou the voice, / Not you” (107). The poem’s speaker then becomes momentarily stuck in the apostrophe, like a skipped recording: “Be thou, be thou / The voice of angry fear, / The voice of this besieging pain. / Be thou that wintry sound / As of the great wind howling, / By which sorrow is released, / Dismissed, absolved / In a starry placating” (107–08). “Half Deity” and “Mozart, 1935” appeared at about the same time, attesting to an uncanny synchronicity between the two poets. Moore’s quieter “young man with piano replies” is perhaps Stevens’ inspiration for Mozart himself, for Stevens returns to him at the end of “Mozart, 1935”: “We may return to Mozart. / He was young, and we, we are old. / The snow is falling / And the streets are full of cries. / Be seated, thou” (108). It may be that Stevens is echoing Moore in “Mozart, 1935.” In the spring of 1935, Stevens marked a passage in his copy of Moore’s Selected Poems that, according to Filreis, seems to have reminded him of his own poem (216): “The piano is a free field for etching; that his charming- / ing tadpole notes / belong to the past when one had time to play them” (BMM 105). The passage that Stevens quoted is from a poem in Moore’s Observations, “The Labors of Hercules.” To convince the public “that the piano is a free field for etching” is, in Moore’s poem, one of the “labors of Hercules” that good citizens must undertake, and Stevens might have seen it as a perfect metaphor for the dilemma of the poet in 1935.

The peculiar final line of “Half Deity,” “His talk was as strange as my grandmother’s muff,” refers to Zephyr’s talk, but Moore changed the line in the 1941 version—again, for the better, I think—to “Their talk was as strange as my grandmother’s muff” (WAY 19; my emphasis). The change establishes a more reciprocal relationship between Zephyr and the butterfly, emphasizing companionship and reinforcing my reading of these poems as a joint poetic statement shared by Stevens and Moore about how to proceed. One has only to think once again of Stevens’ lines from “A Fading of the Sun”—“The warm antiquity of self, / Everyone, grows suddenly cold” (113)—to see further convergences between Moore and Stevens in the final line of “Half Deity.” Or consider the following stanza from “Evening Without Angels”:

Let this be clear that we are men of sun
And men of day and never of pointed night,
Men that repeat antiquest sounds of air
In an accord of repetitions. Yet,
If we repeat, it is because the wind
Encircling us, speaks always with our speech. (111)

Moore’s line may also lead back to the warm world of Moore’s childhood home. Moore writes of this world in a brief essay, “The Education of a Poet,” published in *Writer’s Digest* in 1963. Growing up in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, Moore spent a good deal of time with the Norcross family and their four daughters, three of whom had graduated from Bryn Mawr. She describes their “unfanatical innate love of books, music, and ‘art,’ ” which made artists, writers, and musicians, such as William Blake, Giotto, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, “household companions of the family and their friends” (*CPr* 571–72). Individual liberty and artistic freedom do not come through fanaticism, as Moore made clear in her responses to Pound and to the global political situation of the 1930s. She did not participate in “the haggish, uncompanionable drawl / of certitude” (*BMM* 70) of which Pound was so fond. Freedom does not result from enslaving oneself to an ideal, her critique of Shelley’s impassioned romanticism. It is, rather, to be found in a quiet companionship, in having ears that can hear the rarity of a certain kind of talk, in listening to those strange “antiquest sounds” of a fellow poet and traveler.

The myth of Cupid and Psyche that Moore employs in “Half Deity” ends when the winged Mercury brings Psyche to the palace of the gods, where Jupiter gives her the ambrosia that makes her immortal. Although neither Mercury nor Jupiter appear in “Half Deity,” the figures stand just offstage, the major metaphor of the companionship that is everywhere echoed in the poems of the 1930s. For both Moore and Stevens in the 1930s, the “deceptions” of art, the poet’s assumption of endless guises, become politically productive assertions of artistic freedom that reward the “tested hope” of their readers.

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Notes

1 Wallace Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 779. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with page number(s) only in parentheses.

2 Latimer was a pseudonym for James G. Leippert, one of a number that this mysterious man adopted. From 1934 to 1938, he was editor of *The Alcestis Press*, which published *Ideas of Order* and *Owl’s Clover*. According to Filreis, Latimer applied for and received permission from Stevens in 1935 to ask specific questions about his poetry, questions that were, in fact, “ghostwritten” by the communist poet Willard Maas (121). Strange as this literary correspondence was, Filreis calls Latimer “crucial to [the] poet’s developing awareness of the frenetic interplay between modernism and radi-

3 I use the title the way it appeared in Moore’s 1936 The Pangolin and Other Verse. In The New English Weekly (1935), the title appeared as “Smooth Gnarled Crepe Myrtle!”

4 See chapter 3, “Finding the Proper Way to Fly,” in The Web of Friendship (90–100). In “The Frigate Pelican,” Schulze argues, Moore “recasts her image of Stevens and his verse” in order “to shape Stevens and his music into a more suitable artistic model for an increasingly violent time” (99).


6 In an important essay that considers the politics of Moore’s poetic output in the 1930s, Charles Berger argues that Moore was on a “quest” to identify “an aesthetic not bound to nationalistic identifications,” and that hybridity is a central strategy of this aesthetic (153). Berger argues that Moore thereby challenges “pernicious ideologies of nationalism and hero-worship,” but “not by surrendering the concept of the hero or the nation” (151). Rather, Berger asserts that she does so “by subjecting such affirmations to the rigor of poetic skepticism” (151). Although Berger concentrates primarily on Moore’s poetry in his essay, he notes that Moore and Stevens “are one” in their poetic skepticism (151).

7 In chapter 5, “Pressures Within, Pressures Without,” in The Web of Friendship, Schulze notes that Moore is very much concerned at this stage with shoring Stevens up when the attacks against him reach their peak (144–45).

8 Charles Berger places Moore’s turn to Wordsworth in the context of her overarching poetic strategy of this period that countered dangerously nationalistic claims of identity and identification: “What guides Moore to this allusion [to Wordsworth] is her judgment . . . that heroic accounts of nationalistic origins and nativist identities are not only childish, but are meant, precisely, for the child in us who looks for simple identifications” (163).

9 Both the 1936 and 1941 versions of the poem are reprinted in Grace Schulman’s edition of The Poems of Marianne Moore, but the reader is advised to use caution, as there are a number of punctuation errors in the poems as reprinted in the first edition of this volume.

10 Stevens later “regretted” that he had used the word, telling T. C. Wilson in a July 1935 letter that what he “really meant was scrupulous” (L 281).

Works Cited


MARIANNE MOORE AND Wallace Stevens seemed to track each other with an almost eerie degree of resemblance for close to thirty years, from the days of the Armory Show in 1913 to the middle of the Second World War. *Harmonium* was published in 1923, *Observations* in 1924. Both were long volumes, representing at least a decade’s worth of poetry. The longest poems from each volume, “The Comedian as the Letter C” and “Marriage,” were also composed within a year of each other, in the early 1920s. The short, experimental pieces from these big books gave new definition to the concept of poetic wit and helped to advance a particular school of American poetic modernism that reveled in the play of revisionist intellect. The poetry equivalent of a dual Museum of Modern Art exhibition featuring these two kindred spirits, who spent almost no time together in person, would be quite a blockbuster, illuminating their deep connections, especially when juxtaposed with the poetic ideologies of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. The bond between Moore and Stevens extends, startlingly, even to the timing of their period of prolonged silence, for neither published any poetry between the middle 1920s and the early 1930s. When Moore and Stevens broke that silence, they continued to offer poems that profit greatly from being read in tandem, especially since both poets were deeply engaged in the culture wars of the 1930s. Moore and Stevens fought in hidden collaboration against authoritarianisms of the right and the left, while also searching for legitimate grounds of imaginative authority. The question of what the poet is qualified to comment on, and what poetry can offer in periods of social crisis, was fundamental to the series of poems each wrote in this decade, culminating in “The Man with the Blue Guitar” and the sequence entitled “Old Dominion” from *The Pangolin and Other Verse*. Readers will differ on degrees of proximity between Stevens and Moore throughout the 1930s, but I think it is clear that they always stayed within hailing distance of each other and that each engaged in recognizably similar quests to defend a poetry of critique, while defending the essential independence of art. The poetic ambitions of Moore and Stevens remained equally matched up to the beginning of the Second World War. It is easier to measure Stevensian ambition in this
period—since he published two important volumes of poetry in the 1930s, *Ideas of Order* and *The Man with the Blue Guitar & Other Poems* (which included the shortened version of *Owl’s Clover*)—than it is for Moore. Her *Selected Poems*, published in 1935, included new poems from the 1930s, but made it impossible to distinguish these pieces from earlier works, and *The Pangolin and Other Verse* (1936) was published in a limited edition. By contrast, Stevens followed the limited edition publication of *Ideas of Order* by Ronald Lane Lattimer’s Alcestis Press with a Knopf edition, thus securing a much wider readership even among the limited circle of poetry connoisseurs. To indulge a historical poetic fantasy: had Moore followed Stevens in reissuing *Observations* early in the decade, as Stevens did for *Harmonium*, and then proceeded with a more “public” volume that included poems belonging exclusively to the 1930s, her contribution to the great poetry of that decade would be more clearly understood.

The close resemblance between the two careers began to change mark-
edly as Stevens moved into his long, final phase of extraordinary poetic production, beginning with “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” first published in a limited edition by Cummington Press in 1942 and then appearing in *Transport to Summer* in 1947. This was followed by the major long poems of the 1940s, “The Auroras of Autumn” and “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” collected in *The Auroras of Autumn*, published in 1950, along with a deluge of powerful shorter poems. *The Collected Poems*, including the new section of luminous, valedictory sightings and retrievals, gathered under the heading of *The Rock*, appeared in 1954—a planet on the table indeed. Ariel was glad he had written his poems and there was more to come: *Opus Posthumous*, in 1957, with even more haunting late, last lyrics—forms of survival and forms of farewell. Stevens’ last dozen or more years of writing were a continuous eruption, with the reality of death and cessation as goad to hypernatural vitality. His prolonged period of “last” poems was illuminated by frequent casts of magical, thaumaturgic speculation about the nature of poetic survival, though the clarity of his writing is never dimmed by the *éclat* of his poetic mysticism.

We encounter a different picture when we trace the closing movement(s) of Moore’s career. To begin with, Moore was not able to produce a long, defining poem in the 1940s, nothing along the lines of the Stevens poems mentioned, or H. D’s *Trilogy*, or W. H. Auden’s “Horae Canonicae,” or William Carlos Williams’ *Paterson*, or indeed her own modernist version of the long poem, “Marriage.” Moore wrote two ambitious lyric sequences in the 1930s, “Part of a Novel, Part of a Poem, Part of a Play” and “Old Dominion.” Although she eventually dismantled these sequences by publishing the poems individually, nonetheless at one point in the history of their composition it was clear that Moore was aiming for expansiveness, however idiosyncratically put together. After “Old Dominion” she never wrote another sequence. But it is also the case that Moore, like Robert Frost, Elizabeth Bishop, and W. B. Yeats, was never drawn to the writing
of long poems at any stage in her career, so it would be fairer to say that from the publication of Nevertheless in 1944 on, what marks Moore’s output is not so much the absence of the long poem as the relative scarcity of any new poems, short or long. Indeed, problems with Moore’s productivity, though certainly not the quality of her writing, might already be surmised from the slimness of What Are Years (1941) and Nevertheless. When taken together, these two volumes present fewer than twenty poems ranging over a dozen years, from 1932 (“The Student,” in its first version) to 1944 (“A Carriage from Sweden”). Yet the power and the variety of the lyrics in these books, when read alongside Stevens’ Parts of a World (1942), indicates that the two poets are still in “balance” with each other roughly to the point at which the War draws to a close, though it is true that by 1942 Stevens had already published “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.” From the early 1930s on, Stevens was more prolific than Moore. But starting with the end of the Second World War, the divergence between the two poets, in terms of scope and energy, begins to widen inexorably.

Even before the publication of Nevertheless in 1944, Moore had begun to devote herself to a project that would take over a decade to achieve culmination: her translation of The Fables of La Fontaine (1954). In a 1945 letter to Elizabeth Bishop, Moore was already describing her task in the following terms: “My ‘difficult chore’ is my salvation though every line I do convicts me of a penitentiary crime” (Letters 460). A dozen years intervened between Nevertheless and Moore’s next volume of original new verse, Like a Bulwark (1956). However, the Collected Poems of 1951 did include nine new poems written after Nevertheless and gathered in a section that Moore labeled “Hitherto Uncollected.” Among these poems is the powerful and neglected postwar civilian’s meditation, “‘Keeping Their World Large,’” and the elegiac masterpiece, “By Disposition of Angels.” Moore’s Collected Poems received an extraordinary quartet of prizes: Pulitzer, Bollingen, National Book Award, and the Gold Medal of the National Institute of Arts and Letters. Including these new poems at the end might have registered on Stevens as he put together his own Collected Poems three years later, with its final book-like section, The Rock, containing twenty-five hitherto uncollected poems. Still, it must have struck Moore that the homage she received for her Collected Poems had an uncomfortable air of retrospective celebration to it, as if it were generally acknowledged that her living contribution to poetry had come to an end. Stevens feared the same thing and resisted efforts to “collect” him until he sensed that he was near the end of his life. In Moore’s case it was undeniable that the La Fontaine translation was taking time away from the writing of her “own” poetry, for she wrote almost no new poems between 1948 and 1954.

Robin Schulze’s The Web of Friendship: Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens does a superb job of documenting and describing the growing personal friendship between the two in the last five years of Stevens’ life. Of course they had always been aware of each other’s work and had always consid-
ered themselves implicit allies in the project of American poetic modernism. Schulze illuminates this alliance in a comprehensive fashion. But prior to her study, the crucial nature of the interaction between the two in the 1950s was not fully absorbed by critics and scholars. Schulze emphasizes the role Moore played in the assemblage of the *Selected Poems* of Stevens that Faber and Faber issued in 1951. Stevens was almost superstitiously reluctant to agree to submit to a “selection” of his work, since he was most intensely focused on continuing his poetic activity. He allowed Moore to manage the final selection for him. As Schulze points out, although Moore was hesitant to impose too many changes on Stevens’ own list, she did succeed in convincing him to end the volume of selections not with “Angel Surrounded by Paysans,” but with “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour” (199).

This moment of collaborative editing is less important for what it says about Moore’s aesthetic instincts, since both poems are striking examples of Stevensian end-writing, than for the empirical evidence it provides of Moore meditating, at a distance, along with Stevens on the task of how to contrive forms of farewell. Stevens was eight years older than Moore, so the issue of closure was perhaps more pressing for him, though the grief experienced by Moore through the suffering and death of her mother, who died in 1947, had brought the reality of death unbearably close to her. Schulze’s archival work at the Huntington and the Rosenbach uncovers a series of letters between Barbara Church, Henry Church’s widow, and Moore, who became close friends in the 1950s, recounting an awkward episode in which Stevens clearly tried to convince Moore to abandon La Fontaine and get back to her own poetry (211–16). Moore held her ground, of course, and the slight quarrel between the two occurred near the end of the project anyway, but thanks to Schulze’s work we are able to dwell on this deeply instructive anecdotal moment, for I believe that Stevens was urging Moore not only to return to the writing of original poetry, but also to think about how to shape her career as it neared its end.

Once released from the ligatures of the La Fontaine obligation, and following upon Stevens’ death in August 1955, Moore wrote steadily, if not profusely, for the next fifteen years, publishing her next-to-last poem, “The Magician’s Retreat,” in 1970, two years before she died. The three short volumes of these late years, *Like a Bulwark* (1956), *O To Be a Dragon* (1959), and *Tell Me, Tell Me* (1966), as well as poems written after 1966—gathered in the 1981 *Complete Poems* under the heading, “Hitherto Uncollected”—embody an eclecticism that has proven a challenge to criticism. These poems are markedly more demotic in language and topic than the poetry of the 1940s, in some ways returning us to the quick verbal shifts of Moore’s earliest poetry, though they mostly lack the mordant, epigrammatic acuity of those early, *echt* modernist pieces and are far less overtly critical of social hierarchies. Some critics call Moore’s late poems popular or public verse (Gregory 234–47), but I prefer Cristanne Miller’s and Margaret
Holley’s view that they are better thought of as appreciative or celebratory poetry (Miller 195; Holley 158). Holley stands out for recognizing how many of what she calls Moore’s “testamentary” poems, written in her seventies, focus on art and artistry, as well as on the question of where “poetry belongs and what it is meant to do” (157), but she does not discuss the elegiac factor driving these aesthetic celebrations.

At times, Moore seems to have anointed herself Poet Laureate of, if not the Country, or even the City, then at least the Borough. Auden, too, wrote many praise poems near the end of his career, and it would seem as if Moore, by writing a kind of civic poetry, was on some level turning against the Stevensian paradigm. Although there is no point in denying that some of Moore’s late, last poems attempt to address the “public”—or at least that portion of the public subscribing to The New Yorker, where so many of her later poems were published—it is equally true that a number of her most powerful poems from the late 1940s on address issues of poetic survival and the continuity of cultural institutions that affect the material and spiritual afterlife of poets and poetry. In other words, the crucial dialogue or “quarrel” with Stevens over how to manage the end of a poetic career continues after his death. It may indeed be the case that Stevens becomes more vivid to Moore after he has died and survived as a proleptic paradigm. Poems of this period show how Moore wrestled with the legacy of Stevens’ uncanny wizardry and, in a few cases, verged on a kind of counter-magic of her own. Moore did not write prolifically as a poet in her last decades, so it is not surprising to note that she did not write frequently (or openly) about death and forms of survival in her later work, but when she did she was at her best. The poems I will focus on do not fit the model of Moore as a public or civic poet, for they present that mysterious, implicit rhetoric of self-elegy everywhere on display in Stevens’ final poems, those poems known so well to Moore.

A good place to begin studying the hidden teleological dialogue between Moore and Stevens can be found in a striking poem that she published in The Quarterly Review of Literature in 1948, a year after her mother’s death. “By Disposition of Angels” might be thought of as Moore’s true elegy for her mother, but also as a clear response to Stevens’ invocation of angels in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” the central poem of Transport to Summer, published in 1947. (I am assuming that Moore absorbed the impact of Stevens’ quasi-epic more thoroughly when it appeared as part of Transport, a formidable volume, as opposed to the Cumington Press limited edition format of 1942, especially when linked in time with the death of Mary Warner Moore.) The climax of “Notes” turns to the angels, with canto VIII of It Must Give Pleasure introducing the “angel in his cloud, / Serenely gazing at the violet abyss” (349). Stevens questions the angel, asks questions in the presence of the angel, goes on to question whether the presence of angels takes away from his own gnostic fullness: “What am I to believe? . . . Is it he or is it I that experience this? / Is it I...
then that keep saying there is an hour / Filled with expressible bliss” (349). The questions issue in a quietly triumphant proclamation in the following canto: “I can / Do all that angels can” (350).

“By Disposition of Angels” connects with Stevens through the repetition of the interrogative mode. The poem begins with a question and a demand, waiting for the reader who will connect the query to Stevens: “Messengers much like ourselves? Explain it.” The poem is fourteen lines long and it is divided into two seven-line stanzas. The first three lines of each stanza end with “it”:

Messengers much like ourselves? Explain it.
Steadfastness the darkness makes explicit?
Something heard most clearly when not near it?

Star that does not ask me if I see it?
Fir that would not wish me to uproot it?
Speech that does not ask me if I hear it?
Mysteries expound mysteries. (CP 142)

The triadic or trinitarian opening rhyme schemes, then, are built on identification with an “it” that is by no means alienating, though it maintains “its” distance. Indeed, distance is part of its power, though separation is mediated by the assertion of likeness between the messenger and “some we have known.” Intimacy here, as opposed to the case with Stevens, is not based on internalization, but recognition of the ontological status of the intimate other. In this case, that other is the Mother:

Steadier than steady, star dazzling me, live and elate,
no need to say, how like some we have known; too
like her,
too like him, and a-quiver forever. (CP 142)

The word “a-quiver,” quivering as it does by disposition of the hyphen, enacts a kind of paradigm for survival by flashing a quivering signal toward us “forever,” as Moore says. Moore did not often write in this mode in her last phase, but “By Disposition of Angels,” fashioned in some sense as a response to Stevens’ perhaps overly facile internalizations, is a powerful poem in the mode of the self-elegy. It is intriguing to think that Stevens, a faithful reader of the Quarterly Review, might have written back to Moore on the subject of angels in his 1949 poem “Angel Surrounded by Paysans,” which once again adopts an immanentist, characteristically Stevensian, view of angelic messengers.

The publication of Stevens’ Collected Poems in October 1954 was timed to coincide with his 75th birthday. Moore was present at the celebration of
this event in New York. Two months later, she published one of her most
powerful later poems, “The Staff of Aesculapius” in, of all places, What’s
New, the news bulletin of Abbot Laboratories. The poem, commissioned by
the pharmaceutical company, later appeared in Like a Bulwark (1956). Moore
used the prompt of this occasion to meditate on medical mastery—“A sym-
bol from the first, of mastery” (CP 165), reads the opening line—as em-
blematized by the serpent-coiled staff of Aesculapius, the healer. Consid-
ering the many claims made by Stevens for the thaumaturgical powers of
poetry—“This is the cure / Of leaves and of the ground and of ourselves”
(447)—not to mention his metaphorical trafficking in emblems of poetic
resurrection from “The Auroras of Autumn” on, one might take Moore’s
poem as an effort to demystify the curative effects of poetry by focusing on
a “real” healer. Throughout “The Staff of Aesculapius,” Moore hymns phar-
maceutical wizardry in terms deliberately close to the language of poetry,
as if to set one pharmakon against the other—indeed, as if to temper the
implicit claims of the achieved Stevensian canon by waving “the master-
physician’s Sumerian rod” over and against it. But, attempting to demystify
Stevens somewhat, Moore runs the risk of mystifying science, as when she
writes: “yes, anastasis is the word / for research a virus has defied, / and
for the virologist / with variables still untried.” Anastasis is Greek for re-
urrection, and although it has a medical meaning as well, Moore clearly
intends the word to signify renewal as well, a word she uses openly at the
end of the poem, in association with the shedding of the serpent’s skin:

Now, after lung resection, the surgeon fills space.
To sponge implanted, cells following
fluid, adhere and what
was inert becomes living—
that was framework. Is it not

like the master-physician’s Sumerian rod?—
staff and effigy of the animal
which by shedding its skin
is a sign of renewal—
the symbol of medicine. (CP 165–66)

We find a number of these serpentine images in Stevens, steadily increas-
ing from “The Auroras of Autumn” on, and Moore signals how struck she
is by her dead compeer’s powerful ability to utter the charms, even as she
writes a powerful apotropaic hymn to hypostatized scientific healing. By
the end of the poem, it is difficult to adjudicate rival claims of mastery
between poetry and science, since descriptive terms have become so in-
tertwined, which is precisely what Moore must have intended.

Moore’s ongoing preoccupation with the serpent or dragon as symbol
of renewal—inextricably linked as that creature is to Stevens, via “Fare-
well to Florida” and “The Auroras of Autumn”—will reappear in a poem that serves as a curious, delayed coda to “The Staff of Aesculapius.” I am referring to the short, ecstatic lyric “O To Be a Dragon,” title poem for a brief volume published in 1959: “O to be a dragon, / a symbol of the power of Heaven—of silkworm / size or immense; at times invisible. / Felicitous phenomenon!” (CP 177). In this apostrophe, Moore writes a compressed version of the opening canto of “The Auroras of Autumn,” with the same emphasis on immensity and the minuscule, on visibility and invisibility, with form gulping after formlessness. Charles Molesworth shrewdly speculates that Moore’s wish to be “at times invisible” might come in reaction to the publicity she spurned and craved in the 1950s (400). The serpent always carries images of renewal and rebirth, sublimely so in this poem. The final exclamation—“Felicitous phenomenon!”—signs off with an air of cosmopolitan irony, not infrequent in Stevens himself. But it does not erase the prayerful wish for power and renewal—indeed, for the renewal of power.

Ten years after Stevens’ death in 1955, Moore published a poem in The New Yorker that captures much of her ambivalence toward the example he set as he shaped the close of his career. The title of “The Mind, Intractable Thing” echoes her earlier poem of 1943, “The Mind Is an Enchanting Thing” and also reads like a companion piece to “Logic and ‘The Magic Flute.’” The later poem is one of those rare pieces by Moore in which she attempts to write directly, insofar as that is possible, about the motions of her own mind. When she does so, she cannot avoid the phantom of Stevensian self-imaging, for a number of Stevens’ very last poems frieze the mind at or beyond the last thought. The final poem in The Collected Poems, “Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself,” places the threshold between inside and outside under erasure, for “a scrawny cry from outside / Seemed like a sound in his mind” (451). It follows from this that mind and cry oscillate echoically in a hymn to ontological validation, each summoning the other to the gnosis of “A new knowledge of reality” (452). However one might parse such a poem epistemologically, what Moore seems to register, ten years later, is the boldness of Stevens’ effort to write the mind at its end. With the publication of Opus Posthumous in 1957, Moore would have encountered what many readers now regard as Stevens’ true death masque, “Of Mere Being,” with its unforgettable opening: “The palm at the end of the mind, / Beyond the last thought” (476–77).

The opening of “The Mind, Intractable Thing,” a poem in which the title also serves as the poem’s first line, signals that Moore will be grappling with Stevens’ way of writing psychomachia, even as she renders visible her failed labor to picture the mind at work: “The mind, intractable thing / even with its own ax to grind, sometimes / helps others. Why can’t it help me?” (CP 208). Moore seems to admit that a certain form of mental quarrying is not available to her; she is blocked from objectifying her own consciousness. For her, the mind is not pliable, does not yield to
lyricized x-ray. “Intractable” is a complex trope in the context of this poem, for Moore seems unable or unwilling to “frieze” her mind long enough to map its motions. Or perhaps it is a trick, a trompe l’oeil, that allows one to lay the mind out on a board. The poem takes a turn in this direction when it issues praise to an unnamed poet figure in the following figurations:

O imagnifico,
wizard in words—poet, was it, as
Alfred Panzini defined you?
Weren’t you refracting just now
on my eye’s half-closed triptych
the image, enhanced, of a glen—
“the foxgrape festoon as sere leaves fell”
on the sand-pale dark byroad, one leaf adrift
from the thin-twagged persimmon; again,
a bird— (CP 208)

To some degree, the subject of apostrophe here—“O imagnifico”—is a composite figure, but the term “imagnifico,” not to mention the attributes then ascribed to this poet, summons the creator of “Metaphors of a Magnifico,” that poet she once referred to as “America’s chief conjurer” (CPr 347). A sign of the poet’s wizardry is his ability to keep appearing ahead of one, beckoning phantasmagorically (a phantasmagoric ally) through bequeathed images such as the emblematic bird in the palm at the end of the mind, here identified laconically by “again, / a bird,” a sight reported also by Bishop in “Five Flights Up”: “The unknown bird sits on his usual branch” (CP 181). Although some things about “The Mind, Intractable Thing” remain coded and obscure, what breaks through is the homage paid to the Imagnifico, whom she addresses in the intimate second person: “You understand terror, know how to deal / with pent-up emotion. . . . I don’t.” It is hard to think of another such moment in Moore, where homage to a fellow artist is bestowed so passionately and where the poet needs to measure the difference between herself and the word “wizard,” even if she finds herself lacking in “know how”:

Unafraid of what’s done,
undeterred by apparent defeat,
you, imagnifico, unafraid
of disparagers, death, dejection,
have out-wiled the Mermaid of Zennor,
made wordcraft irresistible:
reef, wreck, lost lad, and “sea-founndered bell”—
as near a thing as we have to a king—
craft with which I don’t know how to deal. (CP 208)
Call it wizardry, call it wordcraft, call it simply craft: Moore declares all of these powers central to the poet who can make art of the rage to survive. The last line—"craft with which I don’t know how to deal"—declares a kind of humility, but also an urge to acquire the wizard’s know how and to become a phantasm in her own right. She certainly passed on the cadence of that last line to Bishop, in whom it became the closing line of “Five Flights Up”: “(A yesterday I find almost impossible to lift.)” (CP 181).

But Moore, like Stevens, also writes self-elegies of a more grounded or naturalistic variety, in which the transmission of aesthetic identity across time is more closely and openly linked to material mediation. Such moments serve to critique Stevensian mystical excess, though Moore, as has already been demonstrated, is deeply drawn as well to a belief in the teleological magic of poetry. Moore celebrated herself as a keener celebrant of elegiac quiddity than Stevens, better able to capture things of the world under the aegis of proleptic preservation. In “The Rock,” Stevens meditated on the thaumaturgic power of poetry to serve as “a cure of the ground” (446), a reclamation of the poet’s burial grounds. In “The Camperdown Elm,” published in The New Yorker in 1967 and gathered that same year in Complete Poems in a section entitled “Hitherto Uncollected,” Moore gives us instead a “curio” of the ground, as she stages a tableau of plausible continuity that eschews flagrant poetic mysticism, while also managing to insinuate a naturalistic version of spiritualism into its purview. Moore wrote a number of poems near the end of her life in praise of successful rescue missions: “Rescue with Yul Brynner” marked the actor’s work with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and “Carnegie Hall: Rescued” celebrated the sparing of that high culture site from demolition. Moore hymns Brynner for saving posterity itself, in a fashion, while the eleventh hour savior of Carnegie Hall recognized that “posterity may impute error / to our demolishers of glory” (CP 230). What is imperiled in “The Camperdown Elm” is an extraordinary tree in Brooklyn’s Prospect Park that Moore regarded as “our crowning curio” (CP 242).

The Camperdown elm (ulmus glabra) is real enough in itself, but Moore employs the ekphrastic to make a connection to the unusual natural object:

I think, in connection with this weeping elm,
of “Kindred Spirits” at the edge of a rockledge
overlooking a stream:
Thanatopsis-invoking tree-loving Bryant
conversing with Thomas Cole
in Asher Durand’s painting of them
under the filigree of an elm overhead. (CP 242)

On its most overt level, this is a civic poem, and its rescue mission marks another occasion in which Moore is promoting intervention on behalf of saving cultural treasures, of whatever sort, for the sake of those who come
after. In this sense, the poet is staking out a small but important place for the poet, continuing the Horatian tradition of writing as a “pygmy citizen” (CP 227), to use a phrase from “Rescue with Yul Brynner,” free to observe the affairs of the great from the margins of power. What distinguishes this poem from other civic pieces written by Moore toward the end of her career is the subtle filigree of genealogical connection, which weaves itself between the lines and limbs of this motto-like poem that inscribes itself on the body of the Camperdown elm. Moore marks the tree for rescue by marking its similarity to an iconic site of American aesthetic gathering: the overlook or rock ledge painted by the Hudson River School master Asher Durand, even though the elm in that painting looks nothing like the idiosyncratic weeping elm of Prospect Park. The Camperdown elm is more shroud than tree, covering any who would stand beneath it. But true connection seems to be triggered for Moore by Durand’s title, “Kindred Spirits,” which is itself taken from Keats’s sonnet “On Solitude.”

Whatever the importance of the material tree in Brooklyn, Moore now superimposes upon it the aesthetic spirits of place who teach us how to see the natural world and who are preserved in séance-like summonings by kindred spirits in the chain, or filigree, of transmission. I have commented elsewhere on Moore’s use of “filigree” in “Virginia Britannia” (“‘Not-Native’ Moore” 162). The word seems ripe for nonce punning, lending itself to “affiliation” and “pedigree,” as if spinning a genealogical web of fictive relation. Taking into account Moore’s evocation of an echt, if not ur-American landscape rendition, it is intriguing to discover that the Camperdown elm itself is a hybrid or cultivar. The genre of the civic poem is overridden, though not obscured, by a speculation upon ways in which poets insinuate themselves into the cultural landscape as a strategy for survival. The ending of the poem reminds us, however, that even kindred spirits need curatorial preservation or material care:

Props are needed and tree-food. It is still leafing; still there. Mortal though. We must save it. It is our crowning curio. (CP 242)

Of all the poems written by Moore in the last two decades of her life, “Granite and Steel,” the opening poem of the 1966 volume Tell Me, Tell Me: Granite, Steel, and Other Topics, has probably received the finest sustained critical attention, though the poem remains little known outside the circle of Moore scholarship. Linda Leavell is quite right to call it “the most ambitious of Moore’s late poems” (192). “Granite and Steel” has the fused compression and ambitiousness of classic modernist poetry, packing large-scale cultural purview into an implosive lyric package, not surprising for a poem that pays homage to Hart Crane while again projecting a different approach to the self-elegy from that taken by Stevens. Although there are superb readings of this poem in the critical literature on Moore (Leavell,
Miller, Stapleton, Holley), the absence of a consensual critical narrative, however contested, on the very shape of her final two decades of publication has made it difficult to see how even her most apparently civic poems are at the same time engaged with questions of her own poetic survival. Laurence Stapleton, who delivers a fine reading in many particulars of “Granite and Steel,” nevertheless operates under the assumption that, although “Marianne Moore of course knew Crane’s The Bridge and James’s ‘New York Revisited’ . . . she was not a self-conscious writer and would not have been likely to compare her poem as it was being set down to either of these parallels” (208). My argument, of course, is that Moore was an intensely self-conscious writer who always engaged in parallel measurements, especially toward the end of her career.

Since Moore’s most powerful final lyrics, those that engage issues of poetic survival and cultural continuity, are not conveniently clustered in a single volume or set in close proximity to each other in an authorized collection, their symbolic force is to some degree scattered—precisely the effect that Moore might have intended, given her wariness toward what she termed “egoecentricity” (quite different from self-consciousness) in the poem “Tell Me, Tell Me.” “Granite and Steel” is not supported by surrounding poems of commensurate power, with the single exception of “The Mind, Intractable Thing.” Instead, it is followed in the volume by an arch and arch-typical occasional piece, “In Lieu of the Lyre,” written in response, as the poet’s notes tell us, “to a request from Stuart Davis, president of the [Harvard] Advocate for a poem” (CP 295). Moore was seventy-nine when she published “Granite and Steel” in The New Yorker on July 9, 1966. “Granite and Steel” is a profound meditation on, and challenge to, American self-righteousness—making it an ironic Independence Day poem—as well as an epideictic self-elegy for the poet.

“Granite and Steel,” a hymn to the Brooklyn Bridge and all that the bridge represents, is more openly echoic than any other Moore poem. Indeed, it contains one of the strongest quotations, only slightly altered from its original source, in all of her poetry. Of course the poem re-presented through much of “Granite and Steel” is Crane’s The Bridge—could it be otherwise? The poem’s opening reprises Crane’s preem “To Brooklyn Bridge,” condensing Crane’s already condensed rhetoric, hitting somewhat different emphases, but conjoining themes of communication, liberty, enfranchisement, and enchainment, just as Crane did:

Enfranchising cable, silvered by the sea,
of woven wire, grayed by the mist,
and Liberty dominate the Bay—
hers feet as one on shattered chains,
once whole links wrought by Tyranny.

Caged Circe of steel and stone,
her parent German ingenuity.
“O catenary curve” from tower to pier, implacable enemy of the mind’s deformity. . . . (CP 205)

Crane’s proem ends with the invocation, “And of the curveship lend a myth to God” (44). Moore retains the rhetoric of apostrophaic praise but treats the catenary (from the Latin *catera*, chain) curve as an ethical corrective, not an opportunity for modern myth-making. What this marvel of engineering, and the inspiring idea behind it, can most powerfully cure is spelled out by Moore in lines that occupy the ethical center of the poem. She sums up the mind’s deformity in the following passage:

... man’s uncompunctious greed
his crass love of crass priority
just recently
obstructing acquiescent feet
about to step ashore when darkness fell
without a cause,
as if probity had not joined our cities
in the sea. (CP 205)

This charge issued by the poet has drawn no critical attention even from the poem’s best readers, though it is as strong a moment of moral condemnation as one will find in Moore’s poetry. The Bridge, promising connection and safe passage, within sight of Liberty, has been obstructed—and “just recently.” The target of the poet’s anger, the specific action or occasion that brings her rebuke, remains unidentified. The rebuke is palpable but abstract, arousing guilt but also a sense of puzzlement: the floating charge seems accurate, since we (the American citizenry) might be said with justification to fail to live up to the promise of the New Colossus, but the precise failure remains unclear. In this instance, Moore uses her signature ambiguities in order to keep her readership, her fellow pygmy citizens, guessing at just what act of omission has been committed, just how we have failed this time to impede the feet of those in search of rescue. It is hard to find another self-elegy by a modern poet that contains such a strong political admonition amid its other concerns. Certainly no such moment exists in Stevens. Yeats and Pound would be places to search for similar moments, although the political sentiments would be diametrically different from Moore’s.

The direct quotation from Crane comes in the poem’s third section, where Moore launches into a flight of apostrophaic rhapsody, cordoned off by quotation marks:

“O path amid the stars
crossed by the seagull’s wing!”
“O radiance that doth inherit me!”
—affirming inter-acting harmony! (CP 205)

The first “quotation” sounds as if it might come verbatim from The Bridge. As Holley points out, however, Moore found the phrase in a footnote to Alan Trachtenberg’s Brooklyn Bridge: Fact and Symbol (Holley 173). Moore is mimicking Crane, verbally and emotionally, borrowing his wings for her rhetorical flight. But the next quotation is indeed very close to verbatim: Crane’s line, in the “Atlantis” section, reads: “(O Thou whose radiance doth inherit me)” (107). Moore’s near-direct quotation acknowledges the gnostic audacity—Crane addressed the bridge as “O Thou steeled Cognizance” (106)—behind the claim that radiance will inherit me, the poet’s ultimate vaunt, but does not quite claim full proprietorship over the utterance, placing it in quotation marks that do not, however, succeed in fully distancing the sentiment, for the apostrophaic address in this case reinforces consanguinity and connection between poets only superficially different from each other. After all, Moore describes this moment of intertextual binding with the phrase “inter-acting harmony”; Moore seals the pledge between her and Crane, on the site of the Bridge, by allowing his words to flow through her poem with only the slightest alteration, creating a moment not so unlike Crane and Whitman’s laying on of hands at the close of the “Cape Hatteras” section of The Bridge (84). To declare oneself worthy of being inherited, not by the wind, but by the radiance, amounts to a form of self-apotheosis. We should not shy away from such a moment in Moore, however rare it is, however preconditioned we might be to blink it away in skeptical disbelief. “Granite and Steel” is followed, two pages later in Tell Me, Tell Me by “The Mind, Intractable Thing.” There the radiance takes on the form of Stevens and all that he figured, so it may be the case that Moore, in her last individual volume, is navigating interstellar passageways by tracking the radiance of certain beckoning/beaconing poets, “Adonais”-style, in at least a few of her final poems.

Late or last poems written by major modern American poets, Stevens in particular, often have a dual perspective, focusing on the commonplace and the eschatological, the detailed and the visionary (this is not to imply that those two categories are oppositional). Moore’s career-long passion for accurate description, her lust for the idiosyncratic but well-built objet, is wholly satisfied by meditation on “John Roebling’s monument.” The final stanza of “Granite and Steel” fuses the dual perspectives in a compact compact, where techne and vision are interlocked, as they were for Roebling:

Untried expedient, untried; then tried;
[sublime elliptic two-fold egg—]
way out; way in; romantic passageway
first seen by the eye of the mind,
then by the eye. O steel! O stone!
Climactic ornament, a double rainbow,
as if inverted by French perspicacity,
John Roebling’s monument,
German tenacity’s also;
composite span—an actuality. (CP 205)

Ending the poem with an affirmation of the actual reveals the haunting
echo of Stevens, for whom the actual and the real were crucial rhetorical
hinges in his final poems. Moore’s paean to the Bridge as an engineering
marvel driven by the necessity of expediency, and confirmed through end-
less experimental trial, is balanced by her visionary celebration of the fin-
ished product as a “romantic passageway” to . . . Atlantis, perhaps.

I have bracketed a line in the above quotation taken from the original
published version of the poem: “sublime elliptic two-fold egg—” (Tell Me,
Tell Me 3). The phrasing in this excluded line is dark and gnomic, but it is
a shame that Moore chose to drop it, for the line points directly, if ob-
liquely, to the very theme of rebirth and renewal that one finds at a num-
ber of crucial junctures in Stevens’ final poems. There is, of course, the
serpent at the opening of “The Auroras of Autumn,” “wriggling out of the
egg” (355). A less well-known late poem, “Things of August,” from the
same volume, contains an extravagant rune on a mysterious “egg” that
seems to serve as a token in some latter-day Eleusynian mystery rite:

We make, although inside an egg,
Variations on the words spread sail.

The morning-glories grow in the egg.
It is full of the myrrh and camphor of summer

And Adirondack glittering. The cat hawks it
And the hawk cats it and we say spread sail,

Spread sail, we say spread white, spread way.
The shell is a shore. The egg of the sea

And the egg of the sky are in shells, in walls, in skins
And the egg of the earth lies deep within an egg.

Spread outward. Crack the round dome. Break through.
Have liberty not as the air within a grave

Or down a well. Breathe freedom, oh, my native,
In the space of horizons that neither love nor hate.

(417–18)
Moore withdrew her own mysterious reference to the sublime elliptic egg, but from the poem’s concern with passageways, monuments, and radiance, it is not too difficult to align her self-censored meaning with Stevens’ cryptic speculation about poetic afterlife. “Ecstasy affords / the occasion and expediency determines the form” (CP 88), Moore wrote near the beginning of her career, in “The Past Is the Present.” That prophetic dictum perfectly describes the dual perspective of “Steel and Granite,” where the Bridge stands as an example of expeditious materiality providing the occasion for ecstasy. It is also a strong reminder that “occasional” poetry can indeed be ecstatic, especially when the occasion calls for the poet to speculate on the final form of her living poetic will.

In 1970, two years before she died, when she was eighty-three years old, Moore published a final poem on the subject of magic, “The Magician’s Retreat.” The poem is ekphrastic, inspired by a Magritte painting, as well as a drawing by a late eighteenth-century visionary French artist, Jean-Jacques LeQueu, as Moore informs us in her note to the poem (CP 297). As Holley points out, the poem’s title is “triple-layered” (180). With the tonality of implicit finality, Moore summons a house fit for a belated magus to dwell in, a house gemütlich but unheimlich as well:

cloudy but bright inside  
like a moonstone,  
while a yellow glow  
from a shutter-crack shone,  
and a blue glow from the lamppost  
close to the front door.  
It left nothing of which to complain,  
nothing more to obtain,  
consummately plain.

A black tree mass rose at the back  
almost touching the eaves  
with the definiteness of Magritte,  
was above all discreet. (CP 246)

In this next-to-last of her published poems, Moore matches Stevens’ trick of writing the near and the far, the domestic and the sublime, as one. Sight is both natural and visionary: “I have seen it” takes a parenthesis, as if to set such seeing apart, and the visible becomes a little hard to see, clouded over by translucence. This “moonstone” is Moore’s version of the planet on the table. She captures the unearthly house at its moment of peaceful dissolution, bringing to mind certain very late poems of her friend, such as “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour.” Moore declares that there is “nothing more to obtain.” Everything about the poem bespeaks a brimming fullness adequately housed. Since this is poetry, Moore cannot
help but leave us with quivering ambiguities. Is the magician’s retreat a withdrawal or a hideout? Has the magician disappeared or is she only hibernating? (Bishop came upon that retreat when she wrote her “proto-dream-house,” her “crypto-dream-house” [CP 179], a few years later in “The End of March.”) The retreat itself, the house, is said to be both “consummately plain” and “discreet.” This epitaphic self-judgment upon her housed body of imaginative work stands as a chiseled poetic credo, revealed and hidden.

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Pragmatist Poetics in
Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore

HEATHER CASS WHITE

[Perception is not whimsical, but fatal.
—Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance”

The trail of the human serpent is thus over everything.
—William James, Pragmatism

THIS ESSAY BEGINS with the conjunction of two actions in William James’s introduction to Pragmatism. “[T]he philosophy which is so important in each of us,” he writes, “is our individual way of just seeing and feeling the total push and pressure of the cosmos” (487). I am curious about the lyrical valences of “seeing and feeling” as they manifest themselves in the work of Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Both poets were, in those years, pushed by the imminent (in Moore’s case) and realized (in Stevens’) catastrophe of the Second World War to think with renewed commitment about the place of poetry in the individual and national consciousness. I shall argue that in that context Moore and Stevens were, however fleetingly, united in a particular understanding of the individual’s capabilities for sight and feeling as the foundations of creative activity in two ways. First, they understood those capabilities as permitting the poet an inner life sufficiently detached from outward circumstance to allow free wandering. Second, they saw them as keeping the poet sufficiently alive to the promptings of that outer circumstance to bring him or her back to reality with something to add.

This understanding formed a marked reversal of both poets’ earlier poetic figures of estrangement from communal, socially bounded discourse. By 1936, when she published her “Old Dominion” series, Moore no longer saw the lonely “porcupine-quilled, complicated starkness” (CP 88) of her monkey-puzzle tree as an adequate poetic model for the ethical poet; no more did the snowman’s frail negative capability suffice for Stevens in the 1942 “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.” Both poets converged instead on figures of lyric activity that cultivated immersion in historical experience as a precondition for a lively, creative interiority. The antecedents of these figures, I will suggest here, are to be found in Ameri-
can pragmatist philosophy, especially in certain metaphors for experience and truth in Ralph Waldo Emerson and William James. Reading Stevens and Moore in light of those metaphors suggests the way that each poet, having participated in a turn away from autobiographically based romantic representations of lyric utterance, nevertheless returned, in their major work, to models of lyric utterance more humanistically based than the earlier work of either might have augured. In their work of the 1930s and 1940s one can observe (to choose a Moore word) the “mechanisms” of James’s philosophy of truth-making:

The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its verification. Its validity is the process of its valid-ation. (574)

In a more epigrammatic formulation of this idea, one that prefigures Moore’s definition of lasting poetry as elephant-travel in “Diligence Is to Magic as Progress Is to Flight,” James calls truth “Any idea upon which we can ride” (512). The metaphor of motion is at the heart of pragmatism, which “converts the absolutely empty notion of a static relation of ‘correspondence’ . . . between our minds and reality, into that of a rich and active commerce . . . between particular thoughts of ours, and the great universe of other experiences in which they play their parts and have their uses” (517). This pragmatist idea of truth-as-action, inherent in the notion of a pushing and pressing cosmos, is the dialectical twin of Emerson’s earlier claim that the apogee of conversation—by which he means both a speaker addressing a hearer and a subject contemplating any object—is silence, and by extension that the right culmination of action is stillness. “Good as is discourse,” he writes,

silence is better, and shames it. The length of the discourse indicates the distance of thought betwixt the speaker and the hearer. If they were at a perfect understanding in any part, no words would be necessary thereon. If at one in all parts, no words would be suffered. (408)

This passage suggests what Emerson elsewhere repeatedly says: that the poet, so far from being in his essence a user of words, is the person best able to transcend them by understanding their ultimate “fugacity” (456) in relation to the “divine energy” (450) which alone is the real poem. On the question of existing, written poems Emerson is at his most Platonic, claiming

poetry was all written before time was, and whenever we are so finely organized that we can penetrate into that region where
the air is music, we hear those primal warblings, and attempt to write them down, but we lose ever and anon a word, or a verse, and substitute something of our own, and thus miswrite the poem. (449)

The question for the living poet, on this basis, must be how to achieve the most propitious attitude for hearing “primal warblings,” and how to transcribe them with the least vitiation. In considering this problem Emerson’s Platonism meets James’s pragmatism in recommending that, since the true silence of total communion has proved so far to be unavailable to any given individual, we persist in “Speak[ing] [our] latent conviction” (259), knowing that “not . . . much [is] gained by manipular attempts to realize the world of thought” (492), yet trusting that “the true romance which the world exists to realize, will be the transformation of genius into practical power” (492).

Given these contradictory instructions, the poet must, evidently, move carefully, remaining quiet and still enough to hear what Emerson calls “the voices which we hear in solitude” (261), while participating by his or her sallies of language in “that inspiration which giveth man wisdom . . . which makes us . . . organs of its activity” (269). Emerson’s terms are sweeping and abstract, but they outline a quite practical dilemma for Moore and Stevens as they weigh in their poems the dual forces of the activity of poets, their “seeing and feeling,” and the activity, the “push and pressure,” of the worlds in which they work. Both Moore’s “Old Dominion” series and Stevens’ “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” are, more than any of their previous work, about the tension between a poet’s lyric aspirations and the obligations conferred upon the poet by his or her situatedness in time and space. The desire to inhabit fully the aesthetic and ethical claims of each of these two parts of the poet’s constitution comes to seem, in Moore’s and Stevens’ work of the 1930s and 1940s, as a technical and existential impossibility, yet, simultaneously, as a moral imperative. That is to say, their poems echo Emerson’s contention, particularly in “Experience,” that the would-be poet has at once a duty to know intimately why the pursuit of a transcendent silence will fail, and a duty to keep pursuing it. The poet’s knowledge of failure, in its broadest terms, stems from his or her recognition that the balance of human action and pushing universe is achieved by ceaseless readjustments of language on the part of the poet. The goal may be rest, but the reality is a never-ending series of movements, however subtle, that (if successful) are like the equilibrium that delighted Moore in circus performers, athletes, and animals (CPr 682–83).

That a true state of balance, requiring no exertion at all and manifested in a transcendent silence, exists is an inference one makes from having passed through it. It is visible only in retrospect, as when Stevens turns away from the singer in “The Idea of Order at Key West” to find that, behind him, “glassy lights” have begun “Arranging, deepening, enchanting
night” (106). This image of revelatory boat lights—lit to serve the crudest human need (that of avoiding collisions in the dark), but transformed into a metaphysical order that “Mastered the night and portioned out the sea” (106)—represents the promise of a stable union, a union at rest, between the “Ecstasy . . . and expediency” (CP 93) that Moore thought made a poem. Its promise is enough to keep the poet approaching it in “ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds” (106). The ethical imperative to pursue this elusive moment is at all times a question of vocation, as if the poet were the appointed prophet of a general spiritual capability, a call to which most of us are deaf. Under the particular economic and political conditions of the late 1930s and early 1940s, however, the task for Stevens and Moore was to present a justification of their faith in this pursuit as a counterbalance to the origins of inequity and violence in the striving of each individual toward self-assertion—striving evident to them nowhere more clearly than in the lyric poet’s desire to speak general truth in a particular voice. Each poet is, in his or her way, suggesting that a focus on the impossible, yet real, lyric moment of balance between self and world is a way of meeting, in Moore’s phrase from 1932, the dangers of “living / in a town like this” (CP 14).

In pursuit of this ideal the poet has at his or her disposal a heightened perception and a more or less adequate language. In the last part of this essay I will have more to say about the poet’s language; to begin, one needs to consider the lineage of Stevens’ and Moore’s understanding of the capacity and moral import of the poet’s faculties of perception. My epigraphs from Emerson and James are meant to suggest, in a highly compressed form, the extent to which those faculties are the intertwined roots of the poet’s power and inevitable failure. The poet is powerful because perceptions are additions to reality, as Emerson says in a passage that anticipates both James’s pragmatist doctrine and Stevens’ most important trope for creativity:

Thoughtless people contradict as readily the statement of perceptions as of opinions, or rather more readily; for, they do not distinguish between perception and notion. They fancy that I choose to see this or that thing. But perception is not whimsical, but fatal. . . . For my perception of it is as much a fact as the sun. (269)

Our perceptions, however, are both “factual” and flawed, at least insofar as what the poet wants from them is not, as Frost has it, “[their] own love back in copy speech, / But counter-love, original response” (307). That we do not move beyond our own “seeing and feeling” is, according to how one understands that limitation, a gift or a burden; in any case, it is the central fact of James’s understanding of truth:

Purely objective truth, truth in whose establishment the function of giving human satisfaction in marrying previous parts
of experience with newer parts played no rôle whatever, is nowhere to be found. The reasons why we call things true is the reason why they are true, for “to be true” means only to perform this marriage-function. (515)

In James’s evocative summation, “The trail of the human serpent is thus over everything” (515). I would like to show here how Stevens and Moore arrive, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, at similar conclusions about the pursuit of lyric balance. Specifically, they articulate a similar set of hazards to the poet in the necessary (and necessarily endless) attempt to inhabit an attitude of projective, creative force that is not overwhelmed by the “push and pressure” of the world, nor rendered irrelevant by a failure to register that push in all its subtlety. I will suggest finally how remarkable their similarity is at that point, given how different their ideas on the same subject grew, beginning only a decade later, in the early 1950s.4

A significant early articulation by Stevens of the poet’s perception and its transformative power is the 1918 poem “Nuances of a Theme by Williams.” In this poem Stevens tests what James calls the “plasticity” of the poet’s shaping consciousness as it confronts a star. In his chapter about “habit” in Psychology, James describes the plasticity of the neural pathways in our brains. He writes: “Plasticity, then, in the wide sense of the word, means the possession of a structure weak enough to yield to an influence, but strong enough not to yield all at once” (Writings 1878–1899 138). This plastic quality of the mind is what makes knowledge possible, and both parts of it, resistance and yielding, are crucial. It is a powerful metaphor for the balance of creating poet and pushing world I have been describing. In large measure Stevens’ poem is about the impossibility of controlling, or even recognizing, the point at which the poet’s effort to impose an influence turns into a yielding to the influence of the object on which he was at work. The poem reads:

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

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

I

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

II

Lend no part to any humanity that suffuses
you in its own light.
Here, Stevens’ nuances are more like contradictions of William Carlos Williams’ theme. Where Williams’ apostrophe cheerfully humanizes the star, celebrating its defiance and independence, Stevens’ specifically exhorts the star to defy the poet’s humanizing impulse, which would make it “chimera of morning.” The more we consider this exhortation, the stranger it seems; the only purpose a poet’s address to the star could serve would be to bring it into human relation to the poet, by positing it specifically as an intelligence receptive to the poet’s language. The poet’s desire that the star “shine like fire, that mirrors nothing” is undone in the moment of his act of apostrophe, at which moment the star, for the poet, may be seen only insofar as it is “suffuse[d] . . . in [humanity’s] own light.” Thus Stevens’ address enacts the ironic reversal of emphasis that Jonathan Culler has argued is characteristic of apostrophe: in the act of invoking the authority of a nonhuman other, the poet authorizes himself as poet, enacting his own vocation in the moment of calling to something else. In this sense, when Stevens wishes upon his star a freedom from human intention, it is his own commanding presence in such schemes that he is granted.

However, in his final exhortation to the star, that it “Be not an intelligence, / Like a widow’s bird / Or an old horse,” the poet suggests an ambivalence underlying his apostrophe. In this ambivalence we can see Stevens’ Jamesian consideration of the necessary “plasticity” of the poet’s consciousness, which asserts its autonomous shape before an object only, if it is successful and alive, to later yield that shape. On one hand, Stevens’ exhortation expresses contempt for the sentimentality of people and their pets, in reaction to which the poet resists making a domestic companion in loneliness out of the star. In this sense his apostrophe is akin to Williams’, in its cry for a beacon of self-sufficiency. At the same time, however, by invoking the bird and the horse, the poet, however quickly he may negate it, reintroduces the question of the immediate human need for the very chimeras it is dispelling. The widow’s bird is a comfort because, like a horse beyond its working years, its animal life is so thoroughly interwoven with human rhythms. Pets may be monsters of a kind, but they are our monsters, born of a lack we cannot slough off by mere choice—or in the course of a single address to a star. As Stevens’ nuances show, that lack asserts itself and begins its transformative work even as the poet inveighs against it.

That Stevens came to welcome the plasticity of resistance and yielding may be seen in his 1944 poem “Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit,” which reads in part:
If there must be a god in the house, must be,
Saying things in the rooms and on the stair,

He must be incapable of speaking, closed,
As those are: as light, for all its motion, is . . .

If there must be a god in the house, let him be one
That will not hear us when we speak: a coolness,

A vermilioned nothingness, any stick of the mass
Of which we are too distantly a part. (288)

In Joseph Carroll’s reading this poem represents Stevens’ apotheosis of abstraction, figured as a “completely closed god [who] has no point of contact with the human. Although at first he appears as ‘Saying things,’ he quickly becomes incapable both of speech and hearing” (209). To my mind, it is important that the god in the house, to whose necessary existence the poet reluctantly accedes by bringing him into being, is not incapable but rather unwilling to hear us. In this way Stevens addresses the earlier problem of the apostrophe that creates chimeras. Rather than fight plasticity, in the mutual working of poet on object and object on poet, the poem practices a delicate accommodation of the inevitable human imposition of self by invoking a god with the capacity to press back on the seeing eye, with his “vermilioned nothingness,” and on the provoking voice, with his “coolness.” This accommodation is its own version of a pragmatist approach to truth-making, in which the individual does not make truth through a series of autonomously willed acts. Rather, truth is made through the accumulated checkings and shapings of will as it presses on reality.

Such a transaction is evident in many places in Stevens’ work. For example, his poem “resist[s] the intelligence / Almost successfully” (306) and his poet is “capable of resisting . . . the pressure of . . . reality” (659). But the capacities of resistance and pressure, as aspects of observation, are various in their effects, a variety mapped in detail in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.” Two examples particularly significant to my inquiry occur close to the division between “It Must Change” and “It Must Give Pleasure,” each focusing on a female figure representing powerful, if incomplete, aspects of the poet’s creativity. In the first, Nanzia Nunzio addresses Ozymandias with an erotic fantasy of self-abnegation, proclaiming:

I am the woman stripped more nakedly
Than nakedness, standing before an inflexible
Order, saying I am the contemplated spouse.
Nanzia’s excitement at the prospect of a wholly distinct “inflexible / Order” and “final filament” is the flip side of the pathos of the poet’s lament in “Less and Less Human” that “It is the human that is the alien, / The human that has no cousin in the moon” (288). Neither pathos nor eros of total separation is permitted to stand, however; in Nanzia’s case it is immediately undone by Ozymandias himself, who answers: “the spouse, the bride / Is never naked. A fictive covering / Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind” (342). Ozymandias’ answer substitutes an erotics of contact and interpenetration, a “Weav[ing],” for Nanzia’s fantasized envelopment. Nanzia, in spite of her desire, resists the immolation she asks for because of the covering inevitably woven out of the pressure of her own creative force when it meets that of the observer to whom she presents herself. No desire on her part can hinder this weaving. The object to which she presents herself will surely try, according to Emerson, to “penetrate and overpower” (126) her; however, as much as she courts that penetration, her own status as a participant in nature means that she will, like the basilisk, try to “cause [her] nature to pass . . . into” her observed object (126).

The seduction of the power to weave oneself into the object through the process of observation threads the second canto of “It Must Give Pleasure.” In this canto we see a second example of the “pushing” quality of observation, this time in retrospect, as if we were visiting Nanzia Nunzio years after her engagement with Ozymandias. At this time memory has succeeded desire in “The blue woman, linked and lacquered,” whom Stevens describes as she looks out of her window. She

Did not desire that feathery argentines
Should be cold silver, neither that frothy clouds

Should foam, be foamy waves, should move like them,
Nor that the sexual blossoms should repose
Without their fierce addictions. . . .

It was enough

For her that she remembered. . . .

The blue woman looked and from her window named

The corals of the dogwood, cold and clear,
Cold, coldly delineating, being real,
Clear and, except for the eye, without intrusion. (345)

That “except” is the caveat that makes all the difference, forming the pivot point in the line’s balance between the world’s “coldly delineat[ed]” reality and the intrusive eye that pushes into it. The idea of the intrusive eye is, in one sense (or would have been in an earlier Stevens poem), the direct offshoot of early Emerson, who contends in the “Prospects” section of *Nature*:

> The ruin or the blank, that we see when we look at nature, is in our own eye. . . . The reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps, is, because man is disunited with himself. (47)

This is the sense in which the eye’s “intrusion” is wholly pejorative; looking on the world the eye is a kind of infectious agent, creating the world in its own “broken” image. In “Notes,” however, the connotation of the eye’s “intrusion” is not simple; the canto of the blue woman suggests a rejection born of satiety in the list of the erotic components of the scene she has known well enough to be at ease in forgoing: foamy waves, sexual blossoms, fierce addictions, and fragrant heat. If the blue woman’s intrusive eye is less than the idealized “transparent eye-ball” (10) of early Emerson, it nonetheless stems from the later Emerson of “Experience,” who limns the seductions of what Stevens, in the line immediately preceding the blue woman’s canto, calls a “later reason.” Emerson writes:

> It is very unhappy, but too late to be helped, the discovery we have made, that we exist. That discovery is called the Fall of Man. Ever afterwards, we suspect our instruments. We have learned that we do not see directly, but mediately. . . . Once we lived in what we saw; now, the rapaciousness of this new power, which threatens to absorb all things, engages us. (487)

I hear in Stevens’ word “except” the traces of the blue woman’s pleasure in that rapacious, absorbing power of the eye’s mediated seeing. The eye’s intrusion, impossible to fully contain, is the flick of human desire in the scene from which all desire has apparently been expunged; the woman’s relation to the “real” is concentrated in it.

This pleasure, which is the sign of an exercise of power, retroactively revises the poem’s initial estimation of the poet’s situation:

> From this the poem springs: 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)
By the end of the poem Stevens has dispelled the pessimism of this passage by taking the risk of belief as James proposes it in the final chapter of *Pragmatism*:

> Does our act then create the world’s salvation so far as it makes room for itself, so far as it leaps into the gap? . . . Our acts, our turning-places, where we seem to ourselves to make ourselves and grow. . . . Why should we not take them at their face-value? Why may they not be the actual turning-places and growing-places which they seem to be, of the world—why not the workshop of being, where we catch fact in the making, so that nowhere may the world grow in any other kind of way than this? (613)

James is talking about religion, but his challenge colors all of what Stevens says about artistry, especially in the final cantos of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.” There Stevens is able finally to wonder if his power has any limits: “If the angel in his cloud, / . . . Leaps downward through evening’s revelations, . . . / . . . Am I that imagine this angel less-satisfied? / . . . Is it he or is it I that experience this?” (349).

The danger of the poet’s imagination is that, as Emerson says, it “threatens to absorb all.” Creativity absorbed in itself loses touch with the real and can no longer add to that real. This is the reason the blue woman is not, for all her assurance, a sufficient emblem of poetic engagement. She is “lacquered,” fixed into place by the transfixing power of her gaze, the mere exercise of which is “enough”: a bare synecdoche for fruitful relation, contenting the blue woman with memory. James’s description of pragmatism’s most salutary effect is that it “unstiffens” our theories, allowing them to participate in “plastic” truth. That stiffness, sign of what James calls the “paleontology” of dead truths, has overtaken the blue woman and characterizes Stevens’ emblem of the fully self-absorbed imagination in the seventh canto of “It Must Change.” In this canto a sparrow is crying to the “crackled blade,” “Bethou me, . . . And you, and you, bethou me as you blow, / When in my coppice you behold me be” (340). In thus recreating himself wherever he is the sparrow contravenes the fundamental dream of the supreme fiction: “Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all, / Out of nothing to have come on major weather” (349). The sparrow’s insensitivity to this possibility stiffens him; the “granite monotony” of his “idiot minstrelsy” makes him “a bird / Of stone, that never changes” (340–41).

In the sparrow’s song Stevens is of course alluding to “Ode to the West Wind” and Shelley’s imperious apostrophe: “Be thou, Spirit fierce, / My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!” (223). No one could accuse Shelley, in this poem, of a “lacquered” quiescence in the face of a pushing and pressing cosmos. However, the result of his impassioned feeling, a hypertrophied version of the blue woman’s darting gaze and the ember of feeling
from which it stems, is if anything more inimical to the poet’s purpose as Stevens understands it here. To address the world with no more complex demand than it be oneself is, paradoxically, to cut peremptorily oneself off from the power of addition and change. To accept, as the sparrow cannot, that the world is both susceptible to our influence and fundamentally separate from us is to enter the only game with stakes worth winning, one in which, as James has it, “The world stands really malleable, waiting to receive its final touches at our hands” (599), in which “the universe [is] unfinished, growing in all sorts of places, especially in the places where thinking beings are at work” (600). As Stevens parodies it in the sparrow’s cry, Shelley’s apostrophe is no more suited to this sort of universe than was Williams’ address to the star. In finding his way around the morass of self-involvement to which a similar apostrophe may yet lead him, Stevens draws instead, I would like to suggest, on a bird of Marianne Moore’s. That bird, a mockingbird, occurs in Moore’s 1936 “Virginia Britannia,” which became the first in her “Old Dominion” series. In that series Moore invents the mockingbird in order to consider problems of observation and invention very like those that trouble Stevens’ “Notes.” Comparing Moore’s conclusions in the “Old Dominion” series with Stevens’ in “Notes,” we see most clearly how each poet finesses the competing claims of historical particularity and the unchanging fact of the world’s difference from us and the call to lyric speech with all the reciprocity between self and other it promises.

“Virginia Britannia” first appeared in the same issue of Life and Letters Today in which Stevens’ essay on Moore, “A Poet That Matters,” appeared, and Stevens undoubtedly read it then. Robin Schulze has detailed the way Stevens turned in the 1930s to Moore’s work as an example of the “new romantic” poetry he was himself trying at the time to write, poetry in which “[Moore] blasted apart the rigid forms of derivative romanticism, [and] collected the fragments into fresh poetry that seemed never to repeat the same tropes twice” (106). Most importantly, Schulze argues that Stevens saw in Moore’s work the ability to create and sustain an openness to new experience and the creative flux it engenders (116; see also chapter 4). This analysis of Stevens’ perspective on Moore is useful in understanding how Stevens’ fight against the empty call of the sparrow is underlaid by Moore’s earlier struggle with repetitive bird song as a possible figure for the lyric poet, especially the no-longer sufficient romantic poet, as he or she faces the world.

Moore’s mockingbird is an emblem, at once living and petrified, of the colonial palimpsest that is the old dominion. This bird, who is both observer and observed, entangles Moore’s poem in the early Emersonian question of whether disorder, “the ruin or blank that we see in nature,” is an internal or an external quality; of whether, in Moore’s terms, “There [ever] was a war that was / not inward” (CP 137). She first draws the reader’s attention to the bird in the fourth stanza:
Observe the terse Virginian,
the mettlesome gray one that drives the
owl from tree to tree and imitates the call
of whippoorwill or
lark or katydid—the lead-
gray lead-legged mocking-bird with head
held half-way, and
meditative eye as dead
as sculptured marble
eye (POV 5)

The mockingbird that unseats and appropriates the calls of the birds of
English literary tradition is an appropriately uncongenial mascot for
Moore’s vision of America in the “Old Dominion” series as a place founded
on the myth of discovery and the reality of imposition. Virginia’s very
plant life becomes in the poet’s reading a text on the subject of human
impositions and their resultant grotesqueries. Looking at the landscape,
she observes:

Care has formed a-
among unEnglish insect sounds,
the white wall-rose. As
thick as Daniel Boone’s grape-
vine, the stem has wide-spaced great
blunt alternating ostrich-
skin warts that were thorns. (POV 4)

The repellent, overgrown wall-rose set in a not-quite-English terrain
epitomizes the aesthetic mutations (and not the good kind) that colonial-
ism has rooted in the American landscape. The moral concomitant of this
mess is apparent in her description of how we took “The Potomac /
cowbirdlike; and on / The Chickahominy / establish[ed] the Negro, op-
portunely bought, to strength- / en protest against / tyranny” (POV 6).
The mockingbird’s motley of purloined calls emblematizes the American
landscape’s layers of historical impositions. As John Slatin’s trenchant read-
ing has it, “the figure of the mockingbird [confronts us] with the possibil-
ity that what is most distinctively ‘American’ in American art . . . may be
precisely that ‘endless’ capacity for ‘imitation’ which has so often been
denounced . . . as a foreign habit detrimental to American expression”
(228). With its “eye dead as sculptured marble eye” the mockingbird is
the antithesis of the student of nature described by Emerson, who be-
comes “a transparent eye-ball”—being nothing, seeing all. Still more im-
portantly, the bird’s fixity means it has stopped “becoming” at all; it has
stiffened, and in its stiffness it has stopped adding even its imitation to
the landscape it finds.
The blind egotism of the mockingbird prefigures Moore’s description of people who “in taking what they / pleased—colonizing as we say— / were not all intel- / lect and delicacy” (POV 8). Like Stevens’, Moore’s idea of taking what one pleases incorporates the action of the eye as much as any physical “taking.” Moore, who writes in “A Grave” that “the sea . . . [is] quick to return a rapacious look” (CP 56), is interested in the relationship between looking and desiring to possess and the ramifications of that desire for the beholder and the beheld. To borrow Gertrude Stein’s phrase, “There is no use in hesitating before [the] coincidence” (131) that Moore uses Emerson’s word “rapacious” to describe the attitude of a man staring into the sea. That man is, as Emerson warns that he is bound to be, absorbed by his own power of seeing when he would better be conscious of the absorptive power of that which looks back at him. But Moore, after 1932, is less interested in objects like glaciers and the sea, “full of the history of power” (CP 46), than she is in the curious strength of creatures who choose not to return the looker’s gaze. The most important of these is a butterfly, the titular hero of “Half Deity,” which Moore placed last in the “Old Dominion” series. In this poem Moore epitomizes the series’ thesis that discovery, imposition, and observation are inextricably entangled concepts both in American history and in American art-making. Her butterfly figures an elusive, half-divine truth that evades direct pursuit and that is repelled by the lightest scent of individual power-seeking. Her figure for that seeking is “Psyche,” a stand-in for Moore herself, who chases a butterfly she cannot catch. Moore describes the pursuit this way:

Disguised in butterfly-bush Wedgwood-blue, Psyche follows it to that small tree, Micromalus, the midget crab; to the mimosa; and from that, to the flowering pomegranate. Baffled not by the quick-clouding serene gray moon but forced by the hot hot sun to pant, she stands on rug-soft grass. . . . (POV 12–13)

The butterfly reacts accordingly:

Vexed because curiosity has been pursuing it, it cannot now be calm. The butterfly’s round unglazed china eyes, pale tobacco brown, with the large eyes of the Nymph on them—gray eyes that now are black, for she with controlled agitated glance observes the insect’s face and all’s a-quiver with significance—
enact the scene of cats’ eyes on the magpie’s eyes, by Goya. (POV 13)

In this quivering scene Psyche’s “controlled agitated glance” works two ways. On one hand it is the means by which the butterfly accrues meaning. In the relationship of their mutual gaze they reenact not only Goya’s painting but a history of observation that has made the butterfly, as the poem later has it, “historic metamorphoser / and saintly animal / in India, in Egypt, anywhere” (POV 14). On the other, Psyche’s devouring look ensures that the butterfly will never choose to come to her. It will not so much as meet her gaze, in fact. Its eye, “unglazed china,” has the unreadability of the mockingbird’s “eye as dead / as sculptured marble,” without that latter eye’s fixity. Psyche cannot read the butterfly’s gaze except to know for sure that it is not turned on her. Instead, the butterfly lands on the hand of a “quiet young man with piano replies, / named Zephyr” (POV 14). At the end of Moore’s poem this human avatar of the West Wind is the poet’s figure of the perfect but impossible lyric speaker, for whom the butterfly, in all other cases “Deaf to ap- / proval,” has “strict ears” (POV 14). Moore ends the poem with what is surely one of her oddest lines: “His talk was as strange as my grandmother’s muff” (POV 14)—a strange image for strange talk, but an image that brings together the paradoxical requirements of adequate lyrical speech. It is a human artifact, made for use, but also archaic, old, and in contact with the past in a way no living thing could be; and it is both foreign and related to the poet, an inheritance half-remembered from childhood.

The “Old Dominion” sequence ends with an ambiguous figure for lyric speech that is at once homely and elusive and, compared to Stevens’ conclusion in “Notes,” instructive in its foreshadowing of the substantially different attitudes toward poetry at which the two poets eventually arrived. I have been arguing implicitly all along that what unites Stevens and Moore, especially in their poems around the Second World War, is their faith in a fundamentally pragmatic view of the individual’s role in the moral universe as James proposes it: that our acts may “be the actual turning-places and growing-places which they seem to be, of the world” (613). James’s proposition, in its turn, stems from an earlier observation of Emerson’s: “If the whole of history is in one man,” he writes in “History,” “it is all to be explained from individual experience. There is a relation between the hours of our life and the centuries of time” (237). What divides the poets in their later work is not a weakening of their mutual commitment to Emerson’s paradigm, but divergent understandings of the relationship he posits between lives and centuries. In the penultimate canto of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” Stevens affirms the primacy of individual experience, over institutional philosophy, as the privileged site of access to the “more than rational.” Reflecting on the relationship of fictions to feelings the narrator says, “They will get it straight one day at
the Sorbonne. / We shall return at twilight from the lecture / Pleased that the irrational is rational, / Until flicked by feeling, in a gilded street, / I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo” (351). Moore, on the other hand, chooses, in the “grandmother’s muff,” a figure made remote by the inexorable facts of history, a subjection to history that decisively characterizes her work from 1951 on.

Two poems, both published in the early 1950s in the Nation, serve to suggest the different directions taken by Stevens and Moore after the intersection of their engagements with Emersonian ideas of perception in the late 1930s and early 1940s. I cannot say that I understand either poem with thoroughness or certainty; however, each poem is irresistibly suggestive and elucidates my sense of the gulf that increasingly opened between the poets as poets, during the very era when their personal relationship was as close as it would ever be. In each poem the success of a relationship that used to be characterized by struggle—Stevens’ with the star in “Nuances” and Moore’s with the butterfly in “Half Deity”—is portrayed as a foregone conclusion, an effortless relation that is the bare ground for the poet’s knowledge of where his or her real struggle lies.

The first of the poems is Stevens’ “One of the Inhabitants of the West,” a poem that first appeared in the Nation in 1952. In it one can read the developed complexity of his deeply pragmatic resistance to “the pressure of the contemporaneous” as he describes it in 1936:

Resistance is the opposite of escape. . . . Resistance to the pressure of ominous and destructive circumstance consists of its conversion, so far as possible, into a different, an explicable, an amenable circumstance. (788–79)

The poem begins:

Our divinations,  
Mechanisms of angelic thought,  
The means of prophecy,  

Alert us most  
At evening’s one star  
And its pastoral text. . . . (428)

We see in this beginning the fruitfulness of “Notes” in modifying the divide between star and poem that troubled Stevens’ “Nuances of a Theme by Williams.” By 1952 the poet has introjected the address by which he approached the star in “Nuances.” In “One of the Inhabitants of the West,” the poet is “Alert[ed]” called out of other occupation by mechanisms that already inhabit him. In this sense the Stevens of 1952, with a lifetime of writing behind him, makes apostrophe an internal figure in his late po-
etry. The poet does not need to call to the star, because he has developed within him a faculty of listening and reception by which the star seeks him out. James the pragmatist might say he has developed that faculty by the long process of lyric calling that went before it. Stevens’ “divinations,” according to a pragmatist model, are the culminating of Stevens’ writing of poem after poem about the possible meeting of human and nonhuman language. In this reading, Stevens’ late receptiveness to the star is the fruit of the willed acts of repetition, each transforming the one that went before, that James calls habit.

Such a description of the poet’s growth—from struggle to mastery, from, in Stevens’ own phrase, the ominous to the amenable circumstance—is useful, but also evades just slightly my sense that the poet has made a leap into the language of stars, that there is in his alertness a change in kind from the powerful but struggling belief in the “possible, possible, possible” (349) of “Notes.” The model for that leap is to be found in an earlier idea of the poet’s work, in Emerson’s idea of the poet as “representative,” an idea in which Emerson himself is more Platonist than pragmatist. Stevens’ alertness to the star’s text recalls Emerson’s description of the poet as the representative who “stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the commonwealth” (448). The crucial factor in the poet’s representativeness is his greater receptivity to the same “impressions of nature,” which Emerson calls “rays or appulses,” to which everyone is subject. “[I]n our experience,” Emerson writes,

the rays or appulses have sufficient force to arrive at the senses, but not enough to reach the quick, and compel the reproduction of themselves in speech. The poet is the person in whom these powers are in balance . . . and is representative of man, in virtue of being the largest power to receive and to impart. (448)

The speaker of “One of the Inhabitants of the West,” who speaks in the first person plural as a representative of “us,” participates in the work of representation Emerson here describes. The speaker’s receptiveness to the star is the necessary prelude to the production of a true Emersonian poem, in which “a thought . . . passionate and alive . . . adorns nature with a new thing” (450). In this poem the lines of force in the poet’s world, “the push and pressure of [his] cosmos,” have been reversed from their direction in “Nuances of a Theme by Williams.” Now it is the poet who feels that pressure without having to exert his own, and in registering it he displays the continuing “relationship between the hours of [his] life and the centuries of time.”

If Stevens’ thoughts on stars demonstrate the arc of his commitment to the representativeness of the Emersonian individual, the fate of Moore’s butterfly shows what happened when Moore accepted representativeness
as a burden against which lyric experience had no right to resist—indeed, as a burden that laid on the poet a responsibility to resist the lyric. In 1950, also in the *Nation*, Moore published “Armour’s Undermining Modesty.” In 1951, she placed it last in her *Collected Poems*. It begins:

At first I thought a pest
Must have alighted on my wrist.
It was a moth almost an owl,
Its wings were . . .

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
like cloth of gold in a pattern
of scales with a hair-seal Persian sheen. Once, self-determination
made an axe of a stone
and hacked things out with hairy paws. The consequence—
our mis-set alphabet.

Arise, for it is day.
Even gifted scholars lose their way
through faulty etymology. (CP 149)

Like Stevens at the beginning of “One of the Inhabitants of the West,” Moore in the first two lines of “Armour’s Undermining Modesty” is granted a fulfillment so lightly as to make the idea of struggle difficult to remember. No longer is she voracious Psyche, chasing the elusive butterfly. Instead the longed for “alighting” happens at the edges of consciousness, while she thinks of something else: the insect of “Armour” chooses her as surely as the butterfly of “Half Deity” chose the west wind. The poet has changed in the interim, however, as has the insect. She is no longer a girl in the “hot hot sun,” but something else, something suited to receive the attention of the nocturnal moth, whose “Persian” beauty is more ornate than the sunburned zebra-stripes of the butterfly.

That the nighttime moth is a figure for the too-late visitation of a no-longer primal creature, whose gild beauty is not the “prismatic colour” (CP 48) of innocence, is suggested by the sentence that follows its introduction. The poet’s leap from the moth’s “Persian / sheen” to the “self-determination” that gave rise to “our mis-set / alphabet” is surely one of the strangest of Moore’s many intensely strange associative leaps. It helps to keep “Half Deity” in mind while reading it, because the association Moore is making is between her earlier pursuit of the butterfly, as a talisman of lyric contact, and the moth, whose worked beauty suggests to her the folly of all dreams of original, recoverable purity. The most “naturally” won lyric moment, the poem implies, depends on an alphabet long
ago defined by the crudity of human ambition. In these lines Moore considers the darker implications of Emerson’s assertion that “the whole of history is in one man.” In her reckoning, that means each man must account for the whole of history, including the consequences of an impure alphabet—a task that might well keep the poet unsure whether a fluttering thing come briefly to stillness is a prophecy or a “pest.”

Having warned the reader about “faulty etymology,” which is one way of describing some of the very associative leaps that are most characteristic of Moore’s difficult poems, “Armour’s Undermining Modesty” enacts it. The poet’s contemplation of the moth, embodiment of the night, is cut short by the injunction, “Arise, for it is day.” Later still, however, the poem’s night-thoughts arise again in the homophonic form of an address to “Knights we’ve known.” The poem’s final stanzas, referring to those knights, reads:

I should, I confess,  
like to have a talk with one of them about excess,  
and armour’s undermining modesty  
instead of innocent depravity.  
A mirror-of-steel uninsistence should countenance continence,  
objectified and not by chance,  
there in its frame of circumstance  
of innocence and altitude  
in an unhackneyed solitude.  
There is the tarnish; and there, the imperishable wish

In the most illuminating reading of this poem I know, Ellen Levy discusses these final stanzas—in Margaret Holley’s words, with their “chain of abstractions with echoing suffixes” (140)—as a kind of elegy for the lost possibility of lyric speech. The poem’s difficulty, Levy argues, results from its “clash between signifier and signified,” a clash that occurs also between its “aesthetic and moral registers” (52). The poem is unique, Levy suggests, in its promise that these registers might be brought together:

“There is the tarnish,” that we have fallen into a world in which differences entail inequalities; “and there the imperishable wish,” that because such differences remain in some sense purely negative, we can still find words in which to suggest that difference may yet prove compatible with equality. (53)

In my reading of the poem, which is colored by my reading of the poetry that came after it, and especially of the increasingly radical revisions
that Moore made to her poetry for the 1967 Complete Poems, the “imperishable[ility]” of Moore’s wish as Levy articulates it is matched only by the intensity of Moore’s later repudiation of it. After 1951 Moore not only gave up on the possibility of the signifier as a latent ethical force, but also brutally excised the traces of her faith in that possibility wherever she found them in her previous work. Moore’s ruthless cutting of her own work, cutting that accelerated and gained new force in the wake of her mother’s death, is the despair of most of her readers. The same poet who, in 1918, celebrated a “beautiful element of unreason” (CP 48) as the necessary foundation of spiritual power, initiated in 1951 an unending campaign against the elements of unreasoned beauty in her own poems. Its targets were specifically the elements of waywardness and extravagance in her language and poetic forms, as her revisions of “Poetry” most famously demonstrate.6

Moore’s aim, so far as it may be inferred from her later poems, was to strip her poetry to its most directly useful essence, of which an unambiguous moral stance was the supreme test and a disdain for her early dazzlements the material sign. Her vision of the poet is, in these strictures, a version of Emerson’s “representative” speaker, but it is a vision of a speaker who has ignored at her own cost Emerson’s insistence that “nothing is of any value in books, excepting the transcendental and extraordinary” (462). Moore paid as heavy a price for her decision to suppress the extraordinary in her work, as has each of her readers afterward. Her penultimate published poem, “The Magician’s Retreat,” which appeared in The New Yorker, suggests that her refusal of wild beauty, Emerson’s “flames and generosities of the heart” (414) whose unfathomable promptings “command [our] curiosity and respect” (269), cost her exactly the capacity, so trenchantly depicted in Stevens’ late work, to be called out of herself by the world. It suggests also that no one sensed that cost more acutely than Moore. She describes the magician’s retreat as “of moderate height,” “[leaving] nothing of which to complain, nothing more to obtain, / consummately plain.” She then describes its more ominous surroundings:

A black tree mass rose at the back
almost touching the eaves
with the definiteness of Magritte,
was above all discreet.

Having described Moore’s revisions as “cuttings,” I will extend the metaphor in reading that “black tree mass” as the gathered and threatening return of the numberless, tendril-like unfurlings of thought and sound she took such pains to uproot in her own work. “[D]iscreet” in the way that Death is discreet in Emily Dickinson’s poem about a carriage-ride to the grave, the tree mass is the antithesis of shelter, undoing the promised comforts of a retreat for the magician at the end of her work. In 1970,
when Moore had for so long committed herself as a poet to listen only to
a strict range of calls—the world’s for moral instruction, her mother’s for
a smooth, “crushed” (CP 90) path between lyricism and reality—nothing
calls to the poet in her final vision of the limits of her human life. The
retreat’s “cloudy” coziness has nothing beyond it but a looming, malign-
nant extinction.

Moore’s programmatic rejection, from the 1950s onward, of latent
thought in favor of manifest purpose, was a catastrophe for her poems.
The scale of the damage it did may be measured by a final comparison
with Stevens, whose vision of life beyond his artistry, in “Of Mere Being,”
is also populated by a tree, a “palm at the end of the mind,” in which:

A gold-feathered bird
Sings . . . without human meaning,
Without human feeling, a foreign song.

The palm stands on the edge of space.
The wind moves slowly in the branches.
The bird’s fire-fangled feathers dangle down. (476–77)

The bird’s dangling fire-fangled feathers, tempting the poet beyond the
reaches of the human mind, offering a hand-hold that would make a new
Prometheus of the poet at the extreme end of age and labor, are the reward
for the poet who has kept faith with the most basic of pragmatist tenets:
that we neither understand the promptings nor know the ends of our acts.
An alertness to “the mechanisms of angelic thought,” especially when those
mechanisms seem wayward and useless, is, paradoxically, the necessary
precondition for the discovery of truth. For the poet in particular the way-
wardness of language, its “fugitive” nature, is a weft of reality that cannot
be evaded, which asserts itself most strongly when the artist most tries to
control it. I understand Moore’s self-censorship as a form of willed silence
in which she chose omissions, even total ones, rather than risk the errors
of commission inevitable in thought made into words. This choice, how-
ever, was an attempted shortcut to the ideal silence Emerson describes as
awaiting any person in deep communication with reality. Moore’s omis-
sions are a sadder silence: not the wordlessness of communion, but the
held tongue of submission.

Moore was a great poet, and no coward. In comparing “The Magician’s
Retreat” with “Of Mere Being,” I have suggested that Moore failed to sus-
tain a faith in the strangeness of beauty and its unpredictable paths to
truth, a failure made the more poignant by her importance to Stevens in
the late 1950s as an icon of just such sustenance. However, that failure
ought to be read as a measure of the difficulty of that faith and of the
pragmatist understanding of truth on which it rests. It is tempting to read
James’s pragmatism as the gentlest and easiest of doctrines. James himself encourages this picture of it, assuring the reader that “[pragmatism] is completely genial. She will entertain any hypothesis, she will consider any evidence” (522). In practice this throws the individual, citizen or artist, continually back on herself as the agent by which truth will be created. “If any one imagines that this law is lax,” cautions Emerson, “let him keep its commandment one day” (274). No person or poet is endlessly plastic. Moore chose to cast her lot with an idea of the usefulness her poetry might have when subjected to a set of criteria based on her mother’s standards for the lasting and the ephemeral. In my reading this was a premature commitment to certainty, even if that certainty manifested itself in Moore’s unwillingness to make use of poetic materials of whose value she was uncertain. I prefer Steven’s palm at the end of the mind to Moore’s black tree mass, as I imagine any lover of lyric would. What Stevens’ and Moore’s choices meant to them as people I cannot say; however, I believe their long engagement with and final divergence on the question of the poet’s imagination as it faces an often bleak reality is as clear a proof as we are likely to have of the force for poetry of James’s pragmatist call to action:

The way of escape from evil... is not by getting it... preserved in the whole as an element essential but ‘overcome.’ It is by dropping it out altogether, throwing it overboard and getting beyond it, helping to make a universe that shall forget its very place and name. (617–18)

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Notes

1 Unless otherwise noted, quotations from William James are from Writings 1902–1910 and will be cited with page number only in parentheses.

2 This summary rests on the voluminous and subtle work of others. My understanding of Moore’s response to America’s domestic and international challenges relies chiefly on John Slatin’s The Savage’s Romance (chapters 4–7) and Luke Carson’s “Republicanism and Leisure in Marianne Moore’s Depression.” James Longenbach’s Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things and Alan Filreis’ Modernism from Right to Left are my guides to Stevens’ complicated response to wartime politics, literary and otherwise.

3 My thinking on the connections between Stevens and American pragmatist philosophy has been enriched by Lyall Bush’s analysis of the distinction between Nietzschean and Emersonian philosophies of language, Richard Poirier’s defense of Emersonian philosophy (especially in its emphasis on the extravagant quality of poetic language), Anthony Whiting’s discussion of the importance of “romantic irony” as a neglected foundation of Stevens’ thought, and Jonathan Levin’s reading of Stevens as a practitioner of “the poetics of transition,” especially in Levin’s discussion of Stevens’ “‘purpose to believe’” (168). I have found particularly helpful Patricia Rae’s argument that Stevens is “not the quintessential ‘fiction-maker’ he is generally per-
ceived to be, but a poet of ‘hypothesis’—a poet who believes . . . that the poet’s utter-
ances should be accountable to the empirical world” (150).

4 The definitive word on the poetic interchanges between Moore and Stevens is Robin Schulze’s The Web of Friendship; without it I might never have considered the relationship at all. In particular, my thinking about Moore’s work in the 1930s has been shaped by Schulze’s reading of “The Frigate Pelican” as Moore’s tribute to Stevens. In that reading Schulze argues that the frigate pelican is Moore’s figure for Stevens’ “creation of violent and vibrant verse that undermines old romantic conventions” (95). Schulze further suggests that, while making clear her admiration for, and identification with, such a figure, however, Moore also “Look[s] aloft, . . . wonder[ing] aloud if such a poet can ever truly serve both the world and the spirit” (95). Schulze concludes that despite her doubts Moore, “Merging her own image with Stevens’s, . . . fashions a workable likeness of a powerful, spiritual poet for a difficult age” (100). After detailing Moore’s rejection of Stevens’ increasingly gendered metaphors for poetic action in the 1940s, Schulze argues that in the 1950s Stevens turns to Moore for an image of “integrity, honesty, and simplicity” (195), whose “faith in the imagination’s power and goodness” (202), “remind[ed] him of his better half” (203). My argument in this essay accords with Schulze’s up until the point of Moore’s work in the 1950s. At that time, just when Stevens feels he has the most to learn from Moore’s faith in the imagination, I see that faith beginning to decline as Moore deliberately undoes her earlier allegiance with just those figures of wild imagination, the frigate pelican foremost among them, that Stevens helped her to create. To put it another way, in the 1950s I see Stevens’ work begin to converge with an idea of Moore’s poetry already largely disappearing from her actual poems: an integrity, honesty, and simplicity, balanced with a trust in the circuitous and circling imagination.

5 Life and Letters Today 13.2 (December 1935): 66–70. Evidence suggests that Stevens paid particular attention to this poem as it was subsequently revised. For example, the 12th through 14th lines of the last stanza of the 1935 version describe a sunset “expanding to earth size” above “redundantly / wind-widened clouds.” In the 1936 version, the clouds themselves widen, “expanding to / earth size above the / town’s bothers with wages / childish sages” (POV 9); and in 1941’s What Are Years? they carry the entire burden of the poem’s moral as “clouds, expanding above / the town’s assertiveness, dwarf / it, dwarf arrogance / that can misunderstand / importance” (32). The increasing significance of those clouds, and perhaps the increasing heaviness of Moore’s treatment, seems not to have escaped Stevens. His “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” (1949) catalogues multiple pairings of clouds and town, voting in the end against the importance of the clouds by attending instead to “an alteration / Of words that was a change of nature, more / Than the difference that clouds make over a town” (415).

6 Although I do not share the optimism of Andrew Kappel’s conclusion that we can discover in Moore’s omissions “a splendidly devised place for the genuine” (154), his essay “Complete with Omissions: The Text of Marianne Moore’s Complete Poems” is itself a splendid and thorough analysis of Moore’s patterns of excision.

Works Cited


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WALLACE STEVENS’ “ANATOMY of Monotony,” composed in 1930, has never generated much in the way of critical response, but to my mind it is one of his greatest poems. Like “The Snow Man,” written nine years earlier, it is a poem that strips away the gaudy inessentials with which the poet sometimes camouflages his confrontations with nothingness, but, whereas “The Snow Man” is in free verse, “Anatomy of Monotony” is in Stevens’ finest and most mellifluous blank verse, and in this respect, as well as in the fact that it is written in symmetrical, numbered stanzas, it is reminiscent of “Sunday Morning” (1915). “Anatomy of Monotony” is a poem that balances the extremes of Stevens’ style and that reaches to the core of his thought, and this is one measure of its greatness as a work of art.

Stevens’ title is difficult to parse and can be grasped only after the poem as a whole has been absorbed, because both “anatomy” and “monotony” are figurative. An “anatomy” is literally a dissection, “the art of separating the parts of an organism in order to ascertain their position, relations, structure, and function” (Merriam-Webster’s), and thus the term metaphorically implies that the poem, in spite of being a mere twenty-two lines long, is an analysis or detailed examination of monotony. This is ironic, however, because it is hard to see how the unvarying sameness of monotony can be analyzed or separated into component parts; indeed, the fact that the positions of the n’s and m’s of “anatomy” and “monotony” are reversed seems to underscore that irony. However, although “monotony” stands in for something that must remain unstated, something too abstract and inchoate to be posited as a simple entity, it is still susceptible of a certain kind of examination, and it may be that Stevens’ “Anatomy” gets to the bottom of “monotony” in a way that philosophy cannot do.

It is clear, in any event, that Stevens’ title echoes and evokes Robert Burton’s seventeenth-century text, The Anatomy of Melancholy. A sense of monotony gives rise to melancholy, and both the poem and the treatise have Ecclesiastes—the locus classicus for our concern with melancholy since the Renaissance—in the background. It is interesting that Stevens added “Anatomy of Monotony” to Harmonium in 1931, because monotony has a tonal as well as an affective meaning. Monotony occurs when something
is uttered or sounded in an unvarying tone or is marked by a sameness of pitch and intensity; this unvarying sameness, however, implies tedium or boredom, or the kind of sadness that we refer to as melancholy and that the French call *ennui*.

Monotony in all of these senses is a central preoccupation for Stevens from the outset of his career. In a lovely earlier poem from *Harmonium*, for example, “The Apostrophe to Vincentine,” he writes:

I figured you as nude between  
Monotonous earth and dark blue sky.  
It made you seem so small and lean  
And nameless,  
Heavenly Vincentine.3

The two monotonies, of earth and sky—of earth, which goes round and round in a circle, and of sky, which the French Symbolist poets call “l’azur” and which Stevens in “Sunday Morning” calls “this dividing and indifferent blue” (54)—diminish the individual to the point of blotting her out and rendering her nameless. The woman is “figured” as “nude,” a term that is less erotic than pathetic in its implications for Stevens’ poetry because it often signifies the metaphorical nakedness of the human condition, and in “The Apostrophe to Vincentine,” she has been so stripped of her attributes that she is in danger of disappearing altogether. As always in a situation of this kind, however, Stevens makes poetry come to the rescue. Having designated her as “heavenly” in the opening stanza, he is able to avert the danger posed by objective reality and, in the concluding stanza, turn the situation on its head:

And what I knew you felt  
Came then.  
Monotonous earth I saw become  
Illimitable spheres of you,  
And that white animal, so lean,  
Turned Vincentine,  
Turned heavenly Vincentine,  
And that white animal, so lean,  
Turned heavenly, heavenly Vincentine. (43)

In other words, Vincentine absorbs monotonous earth into herself and, by so doing, becomes—what she already potentially is—heavenly. This attempt to transform the world to the requirements of the imagination, to negate a barren objectivity by turning it into subjectivity, will be a constant in Stevens’ poetry, but although it has the effect of allaying melancholy, it leaves the monotony of objective reality intact. The conclusion to “The Apostrophes to Vincentine” is not poetically convincing: the rhymed
cadence is out of Poe, and there is something in the patness of Stevens’ conclusion that make one feels he is struggling to cheer everyone up.

Whereas “The Apostrophe to Vincentine” is written in uneven stanzas that make use of rhyme and repetition in a manner reminiscent of Poe’s lugubrious jaggedness, “Anatomy of Monotony,” by contrast, is written in a blank verse so fluent that it gives the effect of complete certitude. Sometimes—more often than critics are willing to admit—one has the feeling that blank verse in Stevens’ hands is too blunt and easily employed an instrument, the poetry in this mode insufficiently sculpted, and, for this reason, tending toward the monotonous. If the “monotony” of the objective world is Stevens’ theme, as I think to a very large extent it is, then it is all the more crucial that we experience his verse as “poetic” rather than prosaic or monotonous. In technical terms, blank verse is situated along the continuum between rhymed verse and prose, and though, as Milton argued, the freedom from the necessity to rhyme can be a poetic gain (Milton goes so far as to associate it with political liberty), blank verse is always in danger of losing its tension and being pulled back into prose or the prosaic. “‘Blank verse,’” notes Samuel Johnson—in a rejoinder to Milton—“‘seems to be verse only to the eye.’”

Moreover, precisely because monotony is so central a concern in Stevens’ work, and because his long poems are sequences that so often are composed as variations on a theme, the danger of falling into poetic monotony is particularly salient. Ironically, in “Anatomy of Monotony,” where Stevens addresses the problem explicitly and philosophically, this does not occur; on the contrary, Stevens’ language in this poem is impelled, from beginning to the end, by the precise gradations of the statement he wants to convey. “Anatomy of Monotony” has the simple ring of truth; here there is nothing superfluous, nor are there empty, monotonous gestures. Stevens has something important to say, something that he discovers in the act of the poem’s making, and the poem is nothing more or less than the precise notation of that discovery. The poem takes the form of blank verse because it is impelled by its philosophical argument, but that argument is so finely tuned and so shapely that it spontaneously turns into (and upon) two eleven-line stanzas, each of which is cadenced by a concluding rhyme. Thus, “Anatomy of Monotony” is what we might call—somewhat paradoxically or oxymoronically—a blank-verse lyric, a form that, if not entirely original to Stevens, is one that he develops in his own unique way. The poem begins in medias res, as if in the middle of a thought-process that was previously silent and that only now, at this entry point, can be heard, or perhaps overheard. The opening lines, indeed, read as if they were the logical response to an unvoiced but easily inferred question:

If from the earth we came, it was an earth
That bore us as a part of all the things
It breeds and that was lewder than it is. (90)
The unspoken question is, “Where did we come from?” or perhaps, “What is the source of our being?” No definitive answer can be forthcoming for human beings, of course, for the obvious reason that our origins are hidden to us, but the opening lines suggest that there are two possible answers (literal or metaphorical): either we came from heaven or we came from the earth. The poem assumes the second of these alternatives as a starting point because it is the more plausible, and it then proceeds to pursue the ramifications of this hypothesis as far as possible.

In one sense, the “Anatomy of Monotony” originates from a fundamental philosophical or religious question, but at the same time Stevens is responding to Wordsworth’s “Intimations of Immortality” ode and to the myth of origin that Wordsworth derives from Plato’s *Phaedo*. “Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting,” Wordsworth writes in the fifth stanza of the ode:

The Soul that rises with us, our life’s Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home. . . . (187)

To the question “Where do we come from?” Wordsworth offers a definitive answer: “From God, who is our home.” In fact, this declaration is much *too* definitive to have the ring of truth—as Wordsworth himself begins to recognize in the very next stanza of the ode:

Earth fills her lap with pleasures of her own;
Yearnings she hath in her own natural kind,
And, even with something of a Mother’s mind,
And no unworthy aim,
The homely Nurse doth all she can
To make her Foster-child, her Inmate Man,
Forget the glories he hath known,
And that imperial palace whence he came. (188)

Earth, the realm of mortality, is personified as a “homely Nurse”: she provides a home for her “Inmate Man,” but she is not particularly attractive—in fact, she is rather *homely*. Man, for his part, as well as being brought up and supported by her and dwelling in her midst, is her orphan and a prisoner within her confines—everything positive is balanced by a negative connotation in these lines. But when we read this stanza from the perspective of the ode’s conclusion, we can recognize its ambivalence, and even though this ambivalence is not registered by the poem’s title, the
stanza marks a growing recognition in the poet that his intimations are more genuinely of mortality:

The Clouds that gather round the setting sun  
Do take a sober colouring from an eye  
That hath kept watch o’er man’s mortality;  
Another race hath been, and other palms are won.  
Thanks to the human heart by which we live,  
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,  
To me the meanest flower that blows can give  
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears. (191)

“Another race hath been, and other palms are won.” This derives not from Plato’s *Phaedo* but from Ecclesiastes: “*One* generation passeth away, and *another* generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever” (1:4).

In the “Anatomy of Monotony,” beginning from the assumption that we came from the earth, Stevens develops an anti-dualistic conception of the cosmos that poses our relationship to the earth in evolutionary terms:

If from the earth we came, it was an earth  
That bore us as a part of all the things  
It breeds and that was lewder than it is. (90)

On one hand, if indeed we came from the earth, then it follows that we could not as a species be different in kind from the other species that inhabit the world. On the other hand, insofar as we are the most advanced or refined species—the least “earthy,” one might say—then this means that before we came into existence the earth was “lewder”—i.e., cruder and more sexual—than it now is. The next three lines recapitulate and extend the theme:

Our nature is her nature. Hence it comes,  
Since by our nature we grow old, earth grows  
The same. We parallel the mother’s death. (90)

The earth is becoming more refined, perhaps more soulful, through us. But just as we, as individuals and perhaps as a species, grow old and die, so too, we can infer, does the earth itself. “Our nature is her nature,” and so what happens to us must happen to “her” as well.

Stevens’ language is so essential, his argument so apparently unassailable, that his use of personification in these lines—if indeed one should call it personification—seems inevitable and almost literal, the only way of expressing what is being said, and hardly even *figurative*. When Wordsworth writes, “Earth fills her lap with pleasures of her own; / Yearnings she hath in her own natural kind,” we visualize a woman. But the “earth /
That bore us as a part of all the things / It breeds,” though a re-figuration of Wordsworth’s trope, is much more impersonal: “bore” is a metaphor, certainly, but in this case it is a way of expressing what would otherwise be inexpressible. The pronominal reference is at first impersonal, and only after the statement of the first sentence does it become feminine—as a result of the spontaneous emergence of the trope. Even so, as the poem unfolds there will remain something uncanny in Stevens’ use of personification, as if the figure paradoxically had the effect of intensifying not only our awareness of the inhuman aspect of the earth, but also our sense that the earth inhabits a plain of reality that is always beyond us.

In fact, this is what the concluding five lines of the first stanza express so forcefully:

She walks an autumn ampler than the wind
Cries up for us and colder than the frost
Pricks in our spirits at the summer’s end,
And over the bare spaces of our skies
She sees a barer sky that does not bend. (90)

These lines are reminiscent of much else in Stevens, above all, perhaps, of “The Snow Man” and “The Course of a Particular,” both of which are in free verse: the first, an early poem and the second, a late one. In “The Snow Man,” where “One must have a mind of winter . . . not to think / Of any misery in the sound of the wind” (8), the same play of personification and de-personification, or, as Harold Bloom suggests, pathetic fallacy and resistance to pathetic fallacy, already obtains (54–55). In “The Course of a Particular,” likewise, “The leaves cry,” but “It is not a . . . human cry, / It is the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves” (460). Similarly, the “she” of “Anatomy of Monotony,” being the earth itself, encompasses a fuller reality than any we could encompass—as the comparative adjectives in the passage emphasize: “ampler,” “colder,” “barer.” But as the last of these ironically indicates, the amplitude that the earth encompasses is the amplitude of “bare spaces” and of a “barer sky” than any we can envision. In the magnificent concluding line of the stanza, Stevens brings hyperbole and litotes together, for in this case to see less is to see more. “She sees a barer sky that does not bend”—a sky without horizon—consequently, without hope, or any desire for things to be other than they are, a sky beyond any human envisioning.

The Wordsworth of the “Immortality” ode remains Stevens’ most immediate predecessor and touchstone:

The Rainbow comes and goes,
And lovely is the Rose,
The Moon doth with delight
Look round her when the heavens are bare,
Waters on a starry night
Are beautiful and fair;
The sunshine is a glorious birth;
But yet I know, where’er I go,
That there hath past away a glory from the earth. (186)

Wordsworth mobilizes personification as a hedge against the bareness of the heavens—that is, against the possibility that heaven is merely sky. The capitalized Rainbow is a symbol (as the actual rainbow is a sign) of hope that the glory that has passed away from the earth will be restored, if only by poetry itself. This hope “comes and goes,” however, and the Immortality ode unfolds as the parabola of its coming and going. Until we reach the magnificent iambic pentameter of the ode’s concluding lines, there is a halting quality to Wordsworth’s prosody (“But yet I know, where’er I go”) that stems from his desire to sustain what in his sonnet “The World Is Too Much with Us” he calls a “creed outworn” (182). Wordsworth’s Platonic myth can be sustained only through a technique of personification that the poet implicitly recognizes to be an anachronism (indeed an atavism), and this is why the ode lurches so spasmodically between hope and despair. The poetic problem that Wordsworth is struggling with is made utterly explicit in the sonnet (which in fact was composed in the same period as the Immortality ode). The complaint of the sonnet is that modern man is existentially isolated, removed from nature as a subject from an object. “Little we see in Nature that is ours,” writes Wordsworth; “We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!” (182). Within the terms of the sonnet, Wordsworth attempts to reanimate his relationship to Nature by resorting to personification, but already by the end of the poem’s octave he is forced to concede that this is not possible:

This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for every thing, we are out of tune. (182)

The image of the sea baring her bosom to the moon attempts to compensate for the fact, in the language of the ode, that “the heavens are bare” (186)—indeed, in the language of Shakespeare’s sonnets, that there is “bareness everywhere.”6 “Great God!” the poet exclaims at the beginning of the sestet, “I’d rather be / A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn.” As the exclamation point indicates, this is more of an expostulation than an invocation because the God in question in this case is the hidden god of deism and modern science, not a personal God who can be addressed. The poet is aware of this, however, and he recognizes the absurdity of the wish he utters even as he utters it. He is caught in a double bind, and the sonnet’s undeniable rhetorical power results from his awareness of this fact, an
awareness that extends even to the trope of personification through which the poet expresses his nostalgia:

Great God! I’d rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn. (182)

Influenced by Wordsworth and yet reacting against his attempt to hold onto “a creed outworn,” Stevens is able to make use of personification without even a hint of embarrassment in his “Anatomy.” There is something truly uncanny in his use of the trope, and this is because personification in the poem functions not to humanize the cosmos but, paradoxically, to make us see that the earth transcends any idea we could possibly have of it, since any idea we could have of it would remain a human (all too human) idea. In one sense, because we are flesh and blood, our nature is an earthly nature and not separate from the things of earth. In evolutionary terms, we come from the earth, which can thus be figured as a mother; hence, “Our nature is her nature.” But precisely because “she” is not human, she is able to confront a reality that we are unable to confront. The reality that she confronts is one that we would be unable to bear. To us it would be unbearably monotonous and melancholy because the desire for transcendence is part of our anatomy, so to speak, the way we have been “hard-wired.” In personifying the earth, Stevens evokes the possibility (impossible in itself) of a consciousness that has transcended the need for transcendence itself. She can be figured as human precisely insofar as she represents and evokes the human desire to go beyond the human, and thus she represents a limit-condition of that which is human.

In the second stanza of the poem, Stevens moves from the earth to “the body.” There are four instances of this word (in the singular or plural) in the stanza. In Stevens’ pathos-laden use of the term, the body is our corporeal substance, a part of the earth and that which connects us to the earth, but also, simultaneously, a metonymy for the person—as when we say anybody or everybody, or simply a body. The word “soul,” with its Platonic/Christian resonances, does not occur in the poem—and this is clearly by design, but the more Hebraic “spirit” occurs twice, once in each stanza. The spirit is that which breathes and, in breathing, animates the body; it is not separate or separable from the body; and because “body” has the meaning of person in the poem as well as corporeal substance, “spirit” is really a modality of the body. But because the word “spirit” in English can connote “soul” or “mind,” Stevens will use it to signify that which is capable of reflection, on the universe and on itself. Thus, the stanza’s pathos has
much to do with the interplay between body and spirit, a spirit that is at once inseparable from the body and yet capable of reflecting on it.8

The stanza contains three sentences, the first of which is seven lines long:

The body walks forth naked in the sun
And, out of tenderness or grief, the sun
Gives comfort, so that other bodies come,
Twinning our phantasy and our device,
And apt in versatile motion, touch and sound
To make the body covetous in desire
Of the still finer, more implacable chords. (90)

The image of the body walking forth naked in the sun is reminiscent of the opening lines of “The Apostrophe to Vincentine”: “I figured you as nude between / Monotonous earth and dark blue sky” (42). In “The Apostrophe,” the earth and sky are “indifferent,” but here the sun has become “much friendlier” and seems to comprehend the pathos of the human condition.9 Just as the personification of the earth as a mother in stanza 1 only seems to humanize or deify her, but actually makes her stand for a confrontation with reality that transcends human limitations, so the personification of the sun as a tender father in stanza 2 is immediately grasped as a projection of “the body.” Grammatically, the phrase “out of tenderness or grief” is linked to the sun rather than to the body, and this has the poetic effect of reversing the logic of the situation, but in such a way that the reversal is grasped. We know very well that tenderness or grief is what the body—i.e., the person—feels, and that if the body attributes its feelings to the sun it does this to comfort itself, to give itself the illusion that it inhabits a familiar world in which earth and sun can be conceived as parental figures. All of this is so obvious to us that, again, the personification carries no sense of embarrassment.

The beautiful play of sun, comfort, come in these lines is reminiscent of what occurs in the second stanza of “Sunday Morning”:

What is divinity if it can come
Only in silent shadows and in dreams?
Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,
In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else
In any balm or beauty of the earth,
Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven? (53)

“Sunday Morning” wards off melancholy by finding “in comforts of the sun . . . Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven,” but in “Anatomy of Monotony,” precisely because heaven can no longer be thought, the sources of comfort are more tenuous. The simple and straightforward
“comforts of the sun” is now inverted in such a way that “the sun / Gives comfort”—as if it were a pagan god. At the same time, however, there is the melancholy acknowledgment that to figure the sun in such a way is to figure it through “phantasy,” through the “device” of personification.

We have to attend closely to Stevens’ syntax, which, like his use of personification, has the effect of doubling the conception in these lines. First, the phrase “so that,” in “the sun / Gives comfort, so that other bodies come,” suggests that the other bodies come as a result of the comfort that the sun gives. But those bodies give comfort as well, and there is an erotic implication to these lines, as well as the suggestion that erotic experience is connected with the imaginary sharing that makes community possible. At the same time, however, there is an awareness that our comfort rests on a process of myth-making, in which these “other bodies” collude, and thus there is a continual oscillation between tenderness and demystification. Second, in the final two lines of the sentence—“To make the body covetous in desire / Of the still finer, more implacable chords”—the pause after “desire” together with the absence of punctuation makes it seem as if desire is both an end in itself and at the same time a desire for something more than itself, or as if erotic desire were both an end in itself and connected to a desire for transcendence that goes beyond sexuality. The desire for transcendence is figured in musical terms, moreover, and it seems clear that it can be satisfied only through the concrete medium of music—which in Stevens is also frequently a metonymy for poetry.

The body is “covetous in desire / Of the still finer, more implacable chords.” Not only does the second of these lines contain one of the poet’s most beautiful figures, but also the line itself exemplifies the musicality and “versatile motion” of Stevens’ blank verse at its best. A pyrrhic in the first foot is balanced by a spondee in the second foot, and the strong emphasis on the second syllable of “implacable” in the fourth foot—a word that is as magnificent as it is strange in this context—leads either to an elision or an anapest in the final foot: “Of the still finer, more implacable chords.” “Implacable” means “not to be lessened or allayed,” and the quest here is for a musical expression that cannot be gainsaid, diminished, or mitigated. This is the music consonant with reality that Stevens seeks throughout his poetry. In Stevens’ conception, music, in order to be adequate to its time, must take reality into account at the same time that it compensates for the bleakness of reality. In effect, the richness of its harmony must compensate for the monotonous of the cosmos. A chord occurs when two or more notes are sounded simultaneously, whereas monotony is literally when there is only one tone. The “still finer, more implacable chords” are reminiscent of and tantamount to the “ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds” of “The Idea of Order at Key West” (1934), and one is struck by Stevens’ use of comparatives in both formulations. The quest is for a music that will remain implacable because it carries the idea it has to express farther than any music had previously done. Similarly, the sky
that Stevens sees is “barer” than the one Wordsworth saw. Not that Stevens is a greater poet than Wordsworth, of course, but that coming after Wordsworth, Stevens knows that he has to go farther and see farther than Wordsworth.

The fact that the first sentence in the stanza covers a full seven lines and concludes in so marvelous a cadence makes the brevity of the second sentence all the more impressive. “So be it”—this is a translation of the Hebrew “Amen.” It signifies a full acceptance of reality—in this case, not only of what precedes the sentence but of what follows it as well:

So be it. Yet the spaciousness and light
In which the body walks and is deceived,
Falls from that fatal and that barer sky,
And this the spirit sees and is aggrieved. (90)

In this balancing of perspectives, note that the long a of “spaciousness” is echoed in that of “fatal,” and that the metrical emphasis is on the first syllable of both words. The word “fatal” means both “pertaining to fate” and “pertaining to death,” and the fate that the poem accepts is one in which life terminates in death because there is no heaven. The poem’s final word, “aggrieved,” rhymes with “deceived,” but it also echoes the “tenderness or grief” that the body experiences and that, together with the speaking voice of the poem, it has attributed to the sun. The spirit, separating itself from the body in order to reflect on its fate, is aggrieved, both because it recognizes that the cosmos is empty (i.e., operates according to mechanical principles) and also, perhaps, because it recognizes the deception in which the body participates. But while the body is deceived and the disillusioned spirit is aggrieved, the poem is neither the one nor the other: in completing its philosophical anatomy, it has simultaneously struck the “implacable chords” and arrived at a harmonious closure.

Thus far, I have delineated Stevens’ anatomy of monotony mainly in terms of his engagement with Wordsworth. But there is also a French connection, and the crucial figure here is Mallarmé. Earlier, with reference to the poem’s title, I noted that the unvarying sameness of monotony implies boredom as well as the melancholy that the French call *ennui*. In French Symbolist poetry generally, and in Baudelaire’s and Mallarmé’s especially, *ennui* is associated with the death of God and the loss of heaven. In the French language, the word *ciel* means both “sky” and “heaven”—one cannot say the one without saying the other; and for this reason, the French Symbolists resorted to the metonymy of the *azure* as a way of avoiding signifying a heaven that could no longer be thought or said. The azure is thus a metonymy for *ciel* and a symbol for the religious circumstances surrounding the problematic nature of the word *ciel* itself. (The Symbolist symbol, typically, is a constellation of ideas rather than a specific entity.) When Mallarmé in “L’Azur,” his great poem of 1864, writes, “Le Ciel est
mort,” this means simultaneously that heaven no longer exists and that
the expanse of space we call the sky is empty—or, as Wordsworth and
Stevens say, “bare.” In his “Anatomy of Monotony,” Stevens takes the word
“bare” directly from Wordsworth, but, as Michel Benamou demonstrates,
the prevalence in Stevens’ lexicon of words such as “nude,” “bare,” “na-
ked,” “pure,” and “nothing” derives in large part from his engagement
with Mallarmé (67–80)—an engagement that we already see in the “divid-
ing and indifferent blue” of “Sunday Morning.”11 In the drama that is played
out in “L’Azur,” the speaker struggles to accept the emptiness of matter
(and of a materialist conception of the universe) but finds that he is unable
to do so and that he remains haunted by the azure itself. The speaker’s
language remains religious, despite himself, as the poet is well aware.

—Le Ciel est mort.—Vers toi, j’accours! donne,
ô matière,
L’oubli de l’Idéal cruel et le Péché
A ce martyr qui vient partager la litière
Où le bétail heureux des hommes est couché. . .

En vain! l’Azur triomphe, et je l’entends qui chante
Dans les cloches. Mon âme, il se fait voix pour plus
Nous faîr peur avec sa victoire méchante,
Et du métal vivant sort en bleus angélus!

Il roule par la brume, ancien et traverse
Ta native agonie ainsi qu’un glaive sûr;
Où fuir dans la révolte inutile et perverse?
Je suis hanté. L’Azur! l’Azur! l’Azur! l’Azur!

[—The Sky is dead.—Toward you I run! Bestow,
O matter,
Forgetfulness of Sin and the cruel Ideal
Upon this martyr who comes to share the litter
Where the happy herd of men is made to kneel. . .

In vain! The Azure triumphs. I hear it sing
In all the bells. The more to frighten us,
It rises in its wicked glorying
From living metal, a blue angelus.

It rolls in with the fog, and like a sword
It penetrates your inmost agony.
Revolt or flight is useless and absurd;
For I am haunted. The Sky! the Sky! the Sky!]

(Mallarmé, Collected Poems 20)
Stevens, I believe, was haunted by these lines throughout his career. Like the speaker of “L’Azur,” he tries to accept a materialist conception of the universe, but finds that he remains “aggrieved” (i.e., filled with grief and bitterness at once). If Stevens read the letter of 1864 in which Mallarmé discusses the composition of “L’Azur”—and it is certainly plausible to think that he did—he would have found Mallarmé saying: “[J]’ai voulu rester implacablement dans mon sujet” ("I wanted to remain implacably within my subject"); my translation [Correspondance de Stéphane Mallarmé, 1:103; cited in Mallarmé, Collected Poems 162]). “A good many words come to me from French origins,” Stevens wrote in a letter of 1950: “I think we have a special relation to French and even that it can be said that English and French are a single language” (L 699).12

The word “implacable” in Stevens’ “Anatomy of Monotony,” as I noted earlier, is both magnificent and strange, and the possibility that in using this word he is echoing Mallarmé’s discussion of “L’Azur” makes sense because of an underlying congruence between the two poets. Both are deeply fatalistic as far as their vision of the cosmos is concerned, and for both the realm of human freedom exists primarily in the inner life of man and above all in the work of art. The subject of both poets is monotony or ennui, the unvarying sameness of a deterministic universe. Both want to remain implacably within their subject because only thus can they produce the still finer, more implacable chords—the unique work of art, which, as such, can never be swept aside, subsumed, and canceled out by the forces of monotony and ennui.

We are drawn to Mallarmé by the word “implacable” not only because Stevens may be echoing the French poet, but also because the strangeness of the word itself makes it a kind of symbol of what the poetry wants to achieve.13 And there is another word in “Anatomy of Monotony” that also comes as a surprise and draws us to Mallarmé. This is the word “fatal” in the penultimate line: “Falls from that fatal and that barer sky.” The first syllable of “fatal,” as I noted earlier, is strongly accented, and this is both because of its meaning and because of the alliteration and the assonantal echo of the first syllable of “spaciousness” two lines earlier. Certainly Stevens’ vision in the poem is a fatalistic one; for if we come from the earth, and there is no heaven, then our fate is to return to the earth in death. Ironically, when this word finally occurs in the poem—so late and almost at its conclusion—it comes as a surprise, especially in contrast to the adjective with which it is paired in the line, “barer,” which has been so well prepared by everything that has preceded. It is this word itself, and not only Stevens’ fatalistic vision, that draws him to Mallarmé.

The connection in this case is to Mallarmé’s sonnet “Quand l’ombre menaça de la fatale loi,” the first of four Petrarchan sonnets that Mallarmé grouped under the rubric of Plusieurs Sonnets (Several Sonnets), each of which deals in some way with the constellations or the night sky. “Quand l’ombre menaça” is a dense and extremely difficult poem, and in order to
draw out the implications for Stevens—that is, to grasp not only the convergence between the two poets but the ways in which they diverge as well—we need to take a reasonably full account of it.

Quand l’ombre menaça de la fatale loi,
Tel vieux Rêve, désir et mal de mes vertèbres,
Affligé de périr sous les plafonds funèbres
Il a ployé son aile indubitable en moi.

Luxe, ô salle d’ebène où, pour séduire un roi,
Se tordent dans leur mort des guirlandes célèbres,
Vous n’êtes qu’un orgueil menti par les ténèbres
Aux yeux du solitaire ébloui de sa foi.

Oui, je sais qu’au lointain de cette nuit, la Terre
Jette d’un grand éclat l’insolite mystère
Sous les siècles hideux qui l’obscurcissent moins.

L’espace à soi pareil qu’il s’accroisse ou se nie
Roule dans cet ennui des feux vils pour témoins
Que s’est d’un astre en fête allumé le génie.

[When the shadow menaced with its fatal law
That old Dream, desire and pain of my spine,
Grieved at being swallowed in night’s black maw
It folded within me its indubitable wing.

O deluxe, ebony hall, where, to beguile a king,
Celebrated garlands are twisted in death:
You are but a proud lie composed of nothing
In the eyes of the solitary dazzled by his faith.

Yes, I know that the Earth, far off from this night,
Casts the radiant mystery of unprecedented light
Which the hideous centuries can never obscure.

Space, unaltered if it grow or decrease,
Rolls in that boredom vile fires as witness
That genius has been kindled by a festive star.]
(Mallarmé, Collected Poems 66)14

The shadow that menaces with its fatal law is, at least in part, the shadow of doubt that puts the “old Dream” of God, heaven, immortality, and transcendent meaning into question. The “fatal law” makes of the universe something mechanistic. It is a fatal law because everything in the universe
is at once fated—or determined—and mortal. To see the cosmos in such a way is to subscribe to a kind of fatalism, according to which individual life is subject to utter annihilation. The saving grace, however, is that the old dream, which previously manifested itself in theological terms, is now internalized as poetry and, in its status as poetry, is no longer subject to doubt: it folds its indubitable wing within the poet.

In the second quatrain, the night sky is likened to a theater: it is a luxurious hall with black walls and ceiling in which everything that happens is done to beguile the king who is the sole spectator of the play being performed. This theater is the closed system of monotheism, and the king taking pleasure in the performance—he is watching the constellations writhing in death—is God. Despite what the theologians may say (and of course they have a great deal to say), the God of monotheism is a sadist and his theater is a theater of cruelty because he is the sole author of the play he is watching. Fortunately, however, none of this happens to be true; it is all a theatrical performance (what Francis Bacon would classify under the Idols of the Theater) and the result of colossal pride. Mallarmé’s syntax is ambiguous toward the end of the second quatrain: in line 7, the theater is a proud lie, but it is unclear whether the darkness or shadows (“les ténèbres”) have created the lie or exposed it—probably both, because the theater is based on nothing, on shadows, and so it stands to reason that those shadows also expose its nullity. The last line of the octave is similarly ambiguous because “ébloui” can mean both “dazzled” and “blinded.” The solitary could possibly be interpreted as a believer in the old sense, but I take it that he is a skeptical poet (the “moi” of line 4) whose old dream, menaced by doubt, has been internalized. He is dazzled by his faith because the physical light of the stars now corresponds to the inner light of inspiration. (The marvelous irony here is that skepticism, coinciding with poetry—the obliteraion of the theater and the folding within of the wing—actually has the effect of intensifying faith: the old theater, on this reading, was inevitably a “theater of cruelty”; it could only be sustained through a species of “bad faith.”) The solitary, however, could also be taken to be blinded by his faith insofar as the internalization of the dream deflects him from reality. If the solitary is taken to be a believer in the old sense, then a similar set of ambiguities obtains.

A pessimistic reading of the octave might observe that if the solitary is blinded by his faith, that faith in the end is no different than the theology it replaces. But this, I think, is contradicted by the sestet, which, in returning to the first person, balances fatalism against the affirmation of the meaningfulness of the unique moment of inspiration. From a physical standpoint, everything is swept up by and into the unvarying sameness of the “process of the suns” (to borrow Tennyson’s phrase in “Locksley Hall” [190]); but those vile fires are at the same time witness to the radiant and unprecedented mystery of inspiration (“l’insolite mystère”), and the light that is emitted in that unique moment can never be obscured by the
monotony of the hideous eons or centuries ("siècles hideux"). In spatial terms—that is, with respect to the empty, Pascalian spaces—it makes not a whit of difference if anything should exist or not exist, appear or disappear, if stars should explode or go out; but nothing of this touches genius and the inner life of man, which takes the light that those stars emit as inspiration and the sign of its own reality.

Mallarmé’s sonnet is no more acceptable to the Stevens of “Anatomy of Monotony” (or at least to the severe “spirit” of its concluding line) than Wordsworth’s Immortality ode had been, because both rest on what Stevens seems to view as a false transcendence: Wordsworth on the old Christian-Platonism and Mallarmé on a kind of aestheticism that makes poetry redemptive. Stevens in his “Anatomy of Monotony” ends where Mallarmé begins—with the inexorability of the “fatal law” and with a spirit that is “aggrieved” by what it sees (“affligé” in the French poem), as if anything else would be sentimental. Of course, Stevens is by no means consistent. In “Adagia” he writes: “After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life’s redemption” (901). But in “Anatomy of Monotony”—and here the contrast is not only with Mallarmé’s “Quand l’ombre menaça” but also with his own “The Idea of Order of Key West”—Stevens is unwilling to lessen the force of his vision or placate himself or his reader by taking refuge in poetry or music as an alternate route to transcendence. Here he insists that the poet can strike the implacable chords only by remaining implacably within his subject.

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Notes

1 Given the brevity of Stevens’ blank-verse lyric, Northrop Frye’s definition of the anatomy as a genre highlights the irony of Stevens’ title. An anatomy, writes Frye, is “[a] form of prose fiction . . . characterized by a great variety of subject matter and a strong interest in ideas” (365).

2 There is no evidence that Stevens was directly influenced by Heidegger, but his emphasis on monotony is reminiscent of the importance of boredom for Heidegger’s thought. “Profound boredom,” writes Heidegger in “What Is Metaphysics?,” the inaugural lecture he gave after being appointed to the Chair of Philosophy at Freiburg, “drifting here and there in the abysses of our existence like a muffling fog, removes all things and men and oneself along with it into a remarkable indifference. This boredom reveals beings as a whole” (101).

3 Wallace Stevens, Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose, 42. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with page number only in parentheses.

4 In his comment on “The Verse” of Paradise Lost, Milton writes: “This neglect then of Rime so little is to be taken for a defect, though it may seem so perhaps to vulgar Readers, that it rather is to be esteem’d an example set, the first in English, of ancient liberty recover’d to Heroic Poem from the troublesome and modern bondage of Rimming” (210).

5 The passage from Johnson’s “Life of Milton” deserves to be quoted at greater length:
The music of the English heroic line strikes the ear so faintly that it is easily lost, unless all the syllables of every line cooperate together; this cooperation can only be obtained by the preservation of every verse unmingled with another as a distinct system of sounds, and this distinctness is obtained and preserved by the artifice of rhyme. The variety of pauses, so much boasted by the lovers of blank verse, changes the measures of an English poet to the periods of a declaimer; and there are only a few skillful and happy readers of Milton who enable their audience to perceive where the lines end or begin. “Blank verse,” said an ingenious critic, “seems to be verse only to the eye.” (443)

6 The words “bare” and “bareness” seem to come to Wordsworth from three of the sonnets: #73 (“That Time of Year Thou Mayst in Me Behold”), in which line 4 reads, “Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang”; #5 (“Those Hours That with Gentle Work Did Frame”); and #97 (“How Like a Winter Hath My Absence Been”). The phrase “bareness every where” occurs in the latter two: “Beauty o’ersnowed and bareness every where” (#5, line 8), and “What old December’s bareness every where!” (#97, line 4).

7 In an essay entitled “Prosopopoeia in Hardy and Stevens,” J. Hillis Miller argues that Stevens’ poem “Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself” is “about the necessity of prosopopoeia and at the same time . . . [a deconstruction] of prosopopoeia” (258). My argument, with respect to “Anatomy of Monotony,” at least, is not that personification (or prosopopoeia) has some sort of generic priority or necessity that the poem uncovers or deconstructs, but, more simply, that Stevens is making deliberate use of the trope in order to evoke a conception of the earth that transcends any human understanding we could have of it and that simultaneously makes us aware of the impossibility of arriving at any such understanding. Stevens is thus quite deliberately using personification against itself.

8 There is thus a slight ambiguity in Stevens’ use of these terms, one that is voiced by Ecclesiastes:

For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity.

All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again.

Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth? (3.19–21)

9 I am of course quoting from stanza 3 of “Sunday Morning”: “And shall the earth / Seem all of paradise that we shall know? / The sky will be much friendlier then than now, / A part of labor and a part of pain, / And next in glory to enduring love, / Not this dividing and indifferent blue” (54).

10 On Stevens’ relationship to Mallarmé, see Hi Simons; Michel Benamou (47–52, 67–86); Robert Cohn; and Anna Balakian (133–57).

11 According to Benamou, Stevens read Mallarmé at least as early as 1914 (69).

12 This is from a letter to Bernard Heringman of November 21, 1950. In a letter to Heringman of May 3, 1949, however, Stevens, commenting on Hi Simons’ essay, “Wallace Stevens and Mallarmé,” writes: “Mallarmé never in the world meant as much to me as all that in any direct way. Perhaps I absorbed more than I thought. Mallarmé was a good deal in the air when I was younger” (L 636).

13 The word “implacable” is not quite a hapax legomenon in Stevens’ lexicon, as it occurs also in “For an Old Woman in a Wig” and “Someone Puts a Pineapple Together” from Three Academic Pieces (Serio and Foster, Online Concordance).
The discussion of the sonnet that follows is based partly on my commentary on the poem (see Collected Poems, 210–13). For a more literal rendering of the sonnet, see Anthony Hartley’s prose version (Mallarmé 84).

Works Cited

Ecclesiastes. Holy Bible: King James Version.
ANTON VANDER ZEE

There’s a little story told by Wallace Stevens that I need to retell—actually it’s an anecdote (anekdota, in the Greek, meaning unpublished items; more familiarly, in English, a small gossipy narrative generally of an amusing and biographical incident in the life of an important person). The anecdote I have in mind. . . .

—Frank Lentricchia

I quote Marx without saying so, without quotation marks, and because people are incapable of recognizing Marx’s texts, I am thought to be someone who doesn’t quote Marx.

—Michel Foucault, as quoted by Frank Lentricchia

THERE IS A LITTLE STORY told by Frank Lentricchia that I need to retell—actually it is an anthology (anthologia, in the Greek, meaning a collection of flowers; more familiarly, in English, a collection of selected literary pieces or passages or works of art, music, or criticism). The anthology I have in mind (like all anthologies) is a collection of variously long and short quotes—in this case, those chosen by Frank Lentricchia for Ariel and the Police (1988), his guerilla raid into Stevens studies, critical theory, and the practice of literary criticism. In the sense that it collects several articles appearing previously in such journals as Raritan, Cultural Critique, and Critical Inquiry, it constitutes an anthology of his own critical past. It also forms an anthology of the most important or pertinent passages from the authors under consideration. In this case, readers witness Lentricchia’s personal anthology of Wallace Stevens’ poetry. Tucked within Lentricchia’s introductory chapter, there also appear a number of minor critical anthologies of New Critical, New Historical, and Marxist methodologies, all of which are found to be lacking in certain key respects. Finally, Lentricchia offers a clever little anthology pertaining to the politicized romantic inheritance of modernist poetry. It is this latter anthology that I want to examine below in the context of the decades-long critical search for a politically progressive Stevens, and the path that one critic has taken.
to find him. I suppose one could call it a cautionary anecdote: an anecdote of an error.

Looking for an ideal confluence of romanticism, modernism, and politics, Lentricchia casts the former as front runners in a “radically realist epistemological project” (18), a project that he wants to find replayed in modernist poetry, especially that of Stevens. Lentricchia senses this realist impulse most forcefully in the early ideals of the imagists, but he also locates it in the less programmatic and more conflicted poetry of Stevens, particularly in the image, or anecdote, of his famous jar. Thus, certain romantics, with Percy Bysshe Shelley as their primary mouthpiece, help facilitate a reading of Stevens that minimizes his abstractionist tendencies, opening up a space in which one can begin to read him as a qualifiedly anti-imperialist political thinker. As the centerpiece of his introduction, Lentricchia himself provides a helping hand in composing one of the great, if unlikely, anti-imperialist poems of the twentieth century: “Anecdote of the Jar” (concerned, as the poem is, with questioning the ethics of all kinds of lexical, aesthetic, political, and geographical “placing”). Against the prophetic and abstractionist strains of Stevens’ romantic inheritance that one receives via Harold Bloom and others, Shelley allows Lentricchia to deliver a poet close to his own socialist-leaning and critically iconoclastic reckonings. But the key to Lentricchia’s argument is not the most obvious one that confronts readers with its tour de force reading, brilliantly constellating lyric, theory, and history. What makes Lentricchia’s method here so instructive, rather, is the thinly veiled transparency of its critical approach, one that works through subtle errors and strategic infelicities of quotation. Close attention to these errors reveals a more challenging and insinuating argument about the ethics of quotation, and about how we, as critics, manage to do things with Wallace Stevens.

First, however, one must return to Lentricchia’s main argument—the one that does not so much matter aside from what it masks. Lentricchia begins by way of quoting from Shelley’s “A Defense of Poetry.” Here, he identifies the “larger romantic injunction: to ‘strip the evil of familiarity’ from the world. Not to make it strange but to see the strangeness there” (18). The mixing of critical metaphors here accomplishes a number of things. Not making it strange, of course, makes one think of not making it new, which reverses certain default critical assumptions. Ultimately, however, it makes sense for Lentricchia to resist and re-orient the meaning of this modernist dictum—one that so uncomfortably chimes in with commodity culture’s taste for novelty, something he examines in Stevens at great length. Combining this subtle reversal with the influential Russian formalist notion of defamiliarization, Lentricchia presents a new twist on an old modernist principle where the poet’s task is a kind of innovative salvage work, mining the familiar for its overlooked, intrinsic value. In the context of Lentricchia’s use of Shelley, “familiarity” should be understood as something, apparently, with both a good and an evil resonance. A
little familiarity, one might say, goes a long way. The poet’s task, then, is to lift the “evil” of familiarity from the world. Presumably, this leaves behind something more promising—let us call it the “good” of familiarity. However clunky these critical moves appear, it might actually work for Stevens, and it also allows Lentricchia to present the politicized romantic project of modernism as one of reframing ordinary objects not in order to obliterate them, but in order to see them anew or to “see the strangeness there”—not in spite of the familiar, but through it. One can almost hear Stevens surveying his late “Debris of Life and Mind,” asking the reader to “Stay here. Speak of familiar things a while.” The familiar takes on a weight that drowns the shallow surfaces promising depth and duration: stay here, speak.

If the above explication of Lentricchia’s methods seems credible enough, think a little bit longer on that phrase that Lentricchia borrows from Shelley: “the evil of familiarity.” It almost looks right, but not quite. Indeed, Shelley actually says nothing at all about the “evil” of familiarity. What he originally writes in “A Defense of Poetry,” according to every authoritative text I have encountered, is that poetry “strips the veil of familiarity from the world, and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty which is the spirit of its forms” (111; my emphasis). The substitution of “evil” for “veil” turns out to be an error of transposition having its origin not in a Lentricchia typo, and not even in his publisher’s printing mistake, but in Lentricchia’s source: the 1971 edition of Hazard Adams’ one-time ubiquitous Critical Theory Since Plato (512). At this point, a number of questions arise. First, why does Lentricchia finish Shelley’s statement, “from the world,” out of quotations, as though it were his own? More importantly, how might both of these errors be useful, and even powerful, in terms of Lentricchia’s argument? To answer these questions, it is necessary to begin by examining how Shelley himself increasingly figures into this chain of exemplary infelicities.

In “A Defense of Poetry” the words “evil” and “veil” appear no less than ten times each. “Evil” is used rather unequivocally as the antithesis and absence of good, which is also the absence, for Shelley, of poetry. Shelley describes his own society as rather unequivocally evil, but upholds poetry as a redemptive force in its inherent movement toward truth, goodness, and beauty. Little nuance inflects his use of “evil.” By contrast, “veil” is a dynamically fluid signifier. “Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world” (77), and Shelley calls for poets to enact this revelatory mode, for poetry is infinite. Yet veils are frustratingly ubiquitous: they can be removed one after another, but the “inmost naked beauty of the meaning never exposed” (100). In one of his more confounding and beautiful figurations of poetry’s role as veiling, unveiling, and re-veiling, Shelley writes:

And whether it spreads its own figured curtain or withdraws life’s dark veil from before the scene of things, it equally cre-
ates for us a being within our being. It makes us the inhabitants
of a world to which the familiar world is a chaos. (112)

Between “veil” and “evil,” then, the distance is potentially chasmal but
also only chiasmal, always threatening to cross or intersect—as in this prob-
lematic transposition of an “e” and a “v,” or the entrance of that critical
“I,” figured here both as that which transforms chasmal into chiasmal and
as an effect of Lentricchia’s strong critical ego as it quotes without quoting.

To the extent that the veil becomes a dominant trope for Shelley, and
arguably a defining fixture of the romantic consciousness, one can begin
to see the purpose of Lentricchia’s error. The concept of veiling signals an
unavoidably metaphysical and somewhat Platonic aura—thus the power
of Shelley’s cautionary sonnet, “Lift not the painted veil.” Veiling also car-
rries religious significations relating to nuns, nuptials, and divine covenants.
In this sense, it is a metaphor for one’s relationship to the divine and un-
known, to the abstract and ineffable. For Lentricchia, reproducing the
misprint from Adams’ Critical Theory Since Plato, whether purposeful or
not, had its motivation in creating out of romanticism a socially conscious
movement with sturdy, if anachronistically, socialist-leaning ideals and
identifiable divisions between good and evil. This, one could argue, re-
places an equally crude rendering of a romanticism drowning in its own
proliferation of veils, constantly worrying its relation to the sublime that
always lies just beyond comprehension. Whether Lentricchia’s approach
constitutes a gentle parody, the hideous offspring, or the successful em-
bodyment of his previous critical work—which famously advocated for a
strong, socially engaged criticism—one can only guess.

If one can forgive Lentricchia this minor error of transposition, one
should also note a second instance in which Lentricchia more actively
misquotes Shelley for more obvious reasons. As before, Lentricchia is
speaking to these socialist implications, which, he writes, are clearly ex-
pressed by Shelley. He quotes a second time from Adams’ version of “A
Defense of Poetry”: “‘The great secret of morals is love; or a going out of
our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with [a] person not our
own’” (19). Compare this with the original text (Adams almost gets it
right this time): “The great secret of morals is Love; or a going out of our
nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in
thought, action, or person, not our own” (78; my emphasis). The ellipsis: not
words left out, but words impossible. Lentricchia strategically fails to
employ the ellipsis that should signal where he chose to exclude Shelley’s
metaphysical gesture toward that grandly ineffable concept of the beauti-
ful, an abstract entity not unlike the “spirit of its forms” that Lentricchia
subtly erases from his first citation. Shelley’s preoccupation with veiling,
his tinkering with religious and Platonic forms, is simply not useful to
Lentricchia, or to the Stevens that he longs for. In fact, attention to such
things merely drags Stevens back into those same old conversations about
abstraction, necessary fictions, vatic modernism, and the like. Instead, Lentricchia finds the romanticism he needs through misprint and erasure, signaling his patent reluctance to admit either Shelley’s primary trope of veiling or his gesture toward the beauty of forms. Ironically, this veiling and this formal beauty remain foundational concepts for Shelley’s ideas about lyric poetry’s social valence in the first place, and I imagine they should be for a critically politicized Stevens as well.  

Whatever his transgression, Lentricchia’s introductory essay is an admirable exercise in exculpation, or even justification. Stevens is not meant to remain in this monolithic construction of a radically realist romanticism. Both Stevens and Lentricchia are far more clever than that, and this section of Lentricchia’s book strikes a calculated critical pose as he toys with various critical models throughout the introduction. Only near the end does he begin to reveal his actual position, asserting that the vulgar or extreme versions of New Critical and New Historical exercises need to “stand in unity by acts of reading, acts of re-telling or cultural constellating” (22). Here, he proposes an early answer to a question that has increasingly concerned scholars in many different areas of literary criticism as they seek out a viable historical formalism. The phrase suggests a critical method that might adequately attend to both the integrity and richness of poetic form while facing fully the worldly reality that everywhere impacts a poet’s formal choices without reducing the one to the other. Lentricchia attempts to chart out the elusive middle way by deploying a more personal voice for his increasingly confessional method. The critic recasts, and in some sense imaginatively relives, the stories of their subject—or, in Lentricchia’s own words, the critic “makes coherent sense of all cultural practices as a totality: not a totality that is there, waiting for us to acknowledge its presence, but a totality fashioned when the storyteller convinces us to see it his way” (22). The master storyteller in this case—where fashioning constitutes a somewhat aggressive, even manhandling critical method—is Lentricchia, refracting the light of his story through numerous cultural and historical prisms. In retelling Stevens’ story, and in releasing Stevens’ poem to larger cultural forces at work, the poet ceases to become the primary storyteller. It is the storyteller who convinces, and when Lentricchia refers to Stevens’ “story against story [that] represents a longing for lyric itself and its imperative” (27), it is Lentricchia’s story as well. It is Lentricchia’s poetry.

This particular story—with its questionable critical prestidigitation and disregard for the citation guidelines that are laid out clearly enough in any basic writing handbook—is enough to concern the honest critic and composition instructor alike. In Lentricchia’s post-Ariel literary, critical, and pedagogical writings, however, this very blurring of author and critic appears essential to the study and teaching of literature. Many critics have disagreed, though Lentricchia would have it no other way: “the imperfect is our paradise” (14), he writes. Actually, this is a famous line from Stevens,
but it remains outside of quotation marks, suggestively unacknowledged. At this point, Lentricchia might ask, what is the difference? He might have a point. Critics are mostly just variously strong or weak re-tellers of other people’s stories. Furthermore, all quotations, whether quoted or not, are technically taken out of context—so many anecdotal jars made to organize so many slovenly critical landscapes. Is it necessarily bad to be so close to an author, as Foucault is to Marx in the epigraph above, that we quote without quoting? That we quote without quotation marks? That their story becomes ours or ours becomes theirs? This kind of merging toward a more perfect union between reader and writer, between critic and poet, may seem like Walt Whitman’s highest hope; but what does it mean for Stevens, who can be read as resisting such co-option, declaring in one poem, “We do not say ourselves like that in poems” (275).

Of course, so quotable is Stevens that one can make him say just about anything, and in critical discussions of his poetry’s political, historical, and social relevance, he appears particularly pliant. Stevens has been chas-tised as an elitist gourmand making his aesthetic or culinary escape, yet defended for his left-leaning sympathies and social empathy; he has been unmasked as a racist bigot, yet credited with a “revolutionary” and socially progressive poetics. Perhaps Stevens is all these things, or nothing; and, as with all great artists, it is increasingly difficult to tell where he stops and where the reader or critic begins. Thinking of the fluid relationship between Stevens and Lentricchia, I am reminded of a somewhat similar critical engagement between the German philosopher and critic Theodor Adorno and the conservative French aesthete Paul Valéry. Plac-ing his critical motives more admirably in the foreground, and perhaps feeling the need to explain his rather odd choice of subject for his own avowedly left-wing, neo-Marxist aesthetics, Adorno writes:

it is only in Valéry’s reactionary aspects that one can see what the forward-moving aspects in him consist of. For the progressive and the regressive moments are not scattered throughout his books; rather, the progressive aspect is wrested from the regressive and transforms the latter’s inertia into its own élan. (140)

Thus, a classic meditation on the intractability of the aesthetic by way of a gray and bare jar becomes, in Lentricchia’s rewriting, a subversive critique of imperialism. The difference between making it political and finding the political there (recalling Lentricchia’s line on strangeness from earlier) is at times uncomfortably vague, perhaps much more so than the revisionary critics who have exhumed the political Stevens over the past two decades might admit. Yet, if Stevens warns, “We do not say ourselves like that in poems,” the same poem also suggests—in a move that first enacts an erasure, then projects a rewriting—that “there are words / Bet-
ter without an author, without a poet, / Or having a separate author, a
different poet . . . a secondary expositor” (274–75). It is unlikely that Stevens
was wagering on critical futures here in a way that recalls how Whitman
beckons his far-off, ideal readers. Indeed, it is almost impossible; but the
impossible—to quote Stevens without quoting correctly, without really
quoting at all—is our paradise.

As for Lentricchia, exercising his method of “retrieval and re-creation” (5), he just keeps on quoting. Sometimes, he even quotes himself without
quoting. A substantial section on Stevens from his Modernist Quartet (1994)
was taken directly from Ariel and the Police, the introduction to which has
also made it into a number of critical anthologies that he has since edited.
First, it was reprinted in his biggest commercial success, Critical Terms for
Literary Study (1990). More recently, his is among the essays in a similarly
pedagogically oriented collection of essays, Close Reading: The Reader (2003),
that he edited with a former student. The unfortunate, if useful, transpo-
sition error has remained in all reproductions, as have his strategic mis-
quotingss. The essay, however, did appear under a different and very
fitting title that more self-consciously calls attention to the various critical
poses he strikes—and that critics all strike—whether they are into theory,
close reading, or the neo-confessional criticism that Lentricchia has
indulged of late. Thus, while critics often read Ariel and the Police as marking
the beginning of Lentricchia’s flight from theory, it is also a deft critical
anatomy of the interpretive process in which he embraces the myriad ways,
both subtle and startling, that critics inventively and unavoidably rewrite
and overwrite their subjects. This, in the very least, is daring in its hon-
esty, as believing in a more authentic or true engagement is every critic’s
necessary fiction, or, as Lentricchia might say, their LSD. I almost forgot:
the new, very fitting title of Lentricchia’s old essay is “How to Do Things
with Wallace Stevens.”

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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 only in parentheses.
2 I use A. H. Koszul’s 1910 edition of Shelley’s prose, compiled—the editor is at
pains to convey—with absolute fidelity from the Bodleian manuscripts.
3 In a chapter on Stevens in her superb Lyric Poetry: The Pain and Pleasure of Words,
Mutlu Konuk Blasing subtly works against the grain of a more politically engaged
Stevens that certain critics—she mentions James Longenbach in particular—have tried
to argue for over the past few decades. She notes in particular Stevens’ refusal of any
determinant social obligation for poetry. She cites a letter to Hi Simons: “It is simply a
question of whether poetry is a thing in itself, or whether it is not. I think it is” (qtd. in
Blasing 133). The point is not that poetry has no social relevance, but that if it does, that
relevance will be most forcefully in evidence through the poem’s uniquely formal—or,
as Blasing might argue, its rhetorical—aspect. This is where we find lyric’s unique and critical purchase on the world: not beyond form, but through it.

4 In a related discussion, gauging the social relevance of Stevens’ attempt to enthrone his absolute or supreme fiction, Lentricchia asks whether that particular cultural power, that freedom and power of the imagination, is ever able to “turn on its economic base, becom[ing] a liberating and constructive force in its own right?” Lentricchia suggests how powerful the lure of that possibility might be for Stevens, while at the same time commenting explicitly on his own critical endeavors specifically, and intellectual pursuits in general: “Believing in that proposition is not the opium of intellectuals, it’s our LSD” (214).

5 I want to acknowledge belatedly—and in an endnote that is not really an endnote, having no corresponding “5” in the text—one moment in this essay in which I quote without quoting. Above, after I quote Lentricchia misquoting Shelley, and then quote Shelley properly for the sake of comparison, I write words that belong to Lentricchia in his introduction to Ariel and the Police: “The ellipsis: not words left out, but words impossible” (13).

Works Cited


Poems

Between Two Lines of a Stevens Poem

for Tsi-gé-yu/Beloved Sharp

A man and a woman
Are one.

A man and a woman,
you are one
of the two-spirit people.

You were kicked many times
by a cowboy boot
of rattlesnake dreams,
swift to recoil,
swift to strike.

You were capable, too,
of paranoia,
of feeling they might
tear you limb from limb,
your future becoming
the disembodied voices I hear
late one night
on a Tahlequah road.

You belong to a race, a history,
I should not be allowed to define.

The child you carried,
bled into loss,
your people’s past
a prison sentence
where victims become
the accused.

One night we argue in Traci’s kitchen.
Hate is part of the bargain, you say,
and you offer it as a gift.

A man and a woman and a blackbird
Are one.

David Linebarger
Tahlequah, Okla.
Sonnet Ending on a Line by Stevens

Without attar, without the thousand-leaved
And hundred-thousand-leaved, without the heaved

Autumnal thunder-light or the blooming bird-
Of-paradise to chase away hells unheard-

Of here, the delicate canopies of trees unfold
Uneasily in this temperate topography: bold

Color scheme of autumn’s simmering wonder
After a heavy rain; hearth fires smothered under

Overtures that end just as night opens the curtain
On the first act of a play we weren’t certain

Would come together—such a hell is dreamt
By those who wake to find the world unkempt.

Without a song, no guitar can tell the birds of bliss
That spring’s bright paradise has come to this.

Jeremy Glazier
Columbus, Ohio

An Ordinary Evening

His house is empty when
He arrives—empty and
Quiet and large. Perhaps,

It is too large for one man
And two women. From
The window of his study

He can look toward the town
He travels to each morning
And returns from each night.

It is winter and the slope of
His yard, so green six months
Ago, is now awash in white,

Patterned slightly by the paws
Of the neighbor’s cat. Of the
Garden nothing remains but
The dried out sticks of roses
Trimmed low to the ground
And protruding some above the
Snow. He sits in his study
And thinks of the green of May
And red of June. He awaits
The return of his daughter and
The start of his dinner,
Hearty, he hopes, and hot. He
Dreams the sound of her feet
Upon the stairs, but realizes
That if he has fallen asleep he
Is now awake for she has entered
His room. He smiles,
Stretches forth his hands,
Hands that she steps forward and
Holds. He remembers how
He used to write to her mother
When he went to such distant places
As Greensboro and Elsie stayed
Here at home to guard the fort,
As they used to joke. Holly pulls
Slightly and he stands, shaky
At first, yet, recalling
The hikes he took last spring.

Dennis Barone
West Hartford, Conn.
Variation of a Theme by Wallace Stevens

Returning home late yesterday afternoon,
I found a yellow slip stuffed in my mailbox,
informing me an effort had been made
to deliver a package earlier in the day.
If I wished it to be left sometime tomorrow
with no one there to sign for it, I was
to put my signature below. I did.

There it was on the porch, still is—a carton the shape
of a huge cigar box or drawer of a dresser.
On the heavy paper it was securely wrapped in,
my name and address were printed in black ink.
The sender’s name was nowhere to be seen.

To lift the box from the tailgate and lug it up
the walk, then drop it smack on my front doorstep
must have taken a muscular one. Finding the box
blocking my going out and coming in,
I’ve resorted to using the door in the back of the house.

Early this morning, day three it is, as I came
around to the front, I made myself stare at the box.
It shook, I swear it shook as if fierce wind
were blowing and the box were filled with dust
or nothingness, though the air was perfectly still.

At seven tomorrow morning, the scheduled time,
I’ll be waiting in the drive to glad-hand and mutter
a few words in the ear of the boss who’s sitting
behind the wheel of the trash collection truck,
with the stub of a big cigar between his teeth.
Resistant as he is for his brawny “boys”
to pick up what won’t fit in the steel containers,
he’ll find in his palm a sum sufficient to have
the box removed and fed to the compactor.

Despite its soon disposal, I feel uneasy
about the great big crate I never ordered.

John Wheatcroft
Lewisburg, Pa.
Cosmos

for Mary Doyle Springer

The pink and fuchsia cosmos she picked lasted
a few days in my pressed glass vase with the simplest
green stem and leaf reappearing here near flaring orange
a splash of major blue inevitable showings of pigment white
as ground painted on, but gently    I’ve been backsliding
the diet of denial too full, a waste of words corroding
my brain    I cannot sort, presume, commence
That she would stoop to clip them as a parting
for whom to bend so low was an effort, and yet no sacrifice
isn’t this Stevens’ dear relation? the commonest kind
which lacking he could imagine along with weather
tension in a believing disbeliever who found his way
by sonar, sounding himself out loud, fashioning a personal
by improvising eloquences of color and fragrance
differing from that incense the ordained wave back and forth
in cathedral tombs where the unpenitential visitor shivers
with foreknowledge    The world’s enough to provoke
urgency to fabricate as if nothing had been done before
to generate out of air, of self, an act so difficult an old poet
grows ferocious, then mild    Whoever has an ear, an eye
if I can imagine you peering over my shoulder, let me not
commit this falling off, this decorator’s card, these plashy petals
too facile, too pretty, all coverall and loud, like wallpaper
glued onto a crumbling wall in a tasteless cook’s kitchen
—oh charity!    we do what we can

Phyllis Stowell
Berkeley, Calif.
No Secrecy in Art

When you see something that is technically sweet, you go ahead and do it and you argue about what to do about it only after you have had your technical success. That is the way it was with the atomic bomb.

J. Robert Oppenheimer

For the occupant/clients of famous glass houses—the offspring of Mies van der Rohe, his ego/genius and a fashion for less of more—form flows, with idyllic ease, not from function but design. Need steps aside for Necessity, and no recourse can remain for her to argue scale or convenience when engineering stands in revelation’s wings.

When you dreamt your lazy dreams beside the Fox River, Dr. Farnsworth, you must have failed to practice what you must have known it takes to float a body’s volume on this earth. Did you think, honestly, that attraction was the source of your arousal, or the energy in his voice when he spoke? Were you absent from class the day they covered the cell’s single-minded ambition, its simple austerity? Or when they explained how if you set a jar down in Tennessee (or any other wild place) it will consume everything around and remain as empty as before?

A home might set more modest goals, even yours with its monocoque steel and crystal quartz frame, that like a fly suspended in a negligee of amber leaves little to help the wilderness imagine a bit less as a lot more. From this distance we can say your faith, if not your taste, was misapplied. But then again we know, as you failed to foresee, how nursed and unwelcome desires can assume irregular and even
ghastly shapes, birthing amorphous
Friday nights: just you—warmed
by your customized recessed lights—
the screech owls and cicadas.

When Blake said Art exists by Naked
Beauty display’d, this ultimatum—
terrific as it is inevitable—did it
appear in a vision, or is it a logical
conclusion for any would-be lovers,
but only proven beyond doubt
when a woman cannot escape her
own brocaded silks, or modern
house of panoptic security? Not
since Troy’s walls fell has a dream
so ravished its dreamer, or sponsored
promise with a hardened heart.
The gods have deserted these details.
Our age, so capable at scattering dust,
leaves fewer pieces of large debris
but spares us expectations. Still, Venus
guides her son to the gate, his hearth
gods and his father on his back.

John Estes
Columbia, Mo.
No Man’s Land

There’s nothing discordant in wanting
I have to keep telling her that
See how the hard-freeze roughs the rosemary up
Burns the more fragile searchlight arcs
Of twisted thyme and the fountainous sage
Spread across and down the stone retaining wall
See what you’ve been spared
My god if only sparing ever stopped
But it doesn’t even want to stop
It evades my barbed wire perimeter
The towers and Mauser-armed guards
The wrangling distractions and the lone resistant
Strain of opening space
Infinitely small infernally spacious
She says I’d get farther faster if my art
Were inflected or twinged with the requisite
Grief but I’m not sad

John Estes
Columbia, Mo.

Aristotle’s Skeleton

Now whenever I hasten
to a tragic conclusion
I think of the enormous mosquito corpse I found
one first day of spring,
between window and storm window,
the abdomen crusted with blood
clear as the jewel in some million-dollar
Deco pin. I wondered if the almost immortal
mosquito had its doubts too, like me,
in the days before artistic dispositions,
when artists were slaves but slaves that knew
their liquid light could not be matched,
the eyes they carried needing but a face,
some pleasure-taking quality of slime
to make them human and bearing proof—
something, it doesn’t really matter what,
no king would be caught dead without.

Kenny Williams
Richmond, Va.
Daniel Andersson’s _The Nothing That Is: The Structure of Consciousness in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens_ announces itself as a printing in book form of Andersson’s doctoral dissertation prepared for Uppsala Universitet, in Sweden. Andersson identifies his purpose as “attempt[ing] a reading of Stevens’ entire poetic production regarded as an entity, as a poetic world from which a certain thematic movement can be derived” (44). His approach to Wallace Stevens’ poetry is professedly ahistorical and abiographical. It is interested in questions neither of influence by other authors (whether literary, philosophical, or other) nor of stages of Stevens’ career as poet—if no emphasis, for example, on early Stevens versus late Stevens. He wants to bring forth a view of Stevens’ unifying poetic persona in terms of essential themes around which the totality of Stevens’ poetry is organized.

As one would expect in a dissertation, Andersson’s book includes an extensive review of the literature. He initially spends a full thirty pages (and actually much of what follows) surveying the field of Stevens criticism, and covers an impressive volume of critical books and essays. Usually he devotes only a sentence or two to each—such that one can hardly avoid thinking of J. Alfred Prufrock, fixed “in a formulated phrase.” Still, if there is a weakness in Andersson’s survey, it is not so much that he only briefly “formulates” the works he mentions, as that he tends to accept them equally, not making evaluative discriminations that would give cleaner definition to his own reading of Stevens. For the cause of clarity and in service of his general strategy, however, he does choose Richard Allen Blessing’s _Wallace Stevens’ “Whole Harmonium”_ (1970), James Baird’s _The Dome and the Rock_ (1968), and Joseph Riddel’s _The Clairvoyant Eye_ (1965) as his chief critical forebears, because these studies, like his own, attempt to capture the shape of Stevens’ poetic corpus as a coherent whole (a version of the “Grand Poem”). He also finds in the later work of Riddel, specifically in the 1980 essay “Metaphoric Staging,” a basis for his philosophical approach to Stevens, namely, Riddel’s discovery that “The self is a poetic invention, the production of an identity by a marking of its nonidentity” (42).

Andersson’s mode for accomplishing the “reading of Stevens’ entire poetic production” is “thematic criticism,” a predominantly European literary-critical approach associated with the “Geneva School” (44). Thematic criticism concerns itself with the writer’s _œuvres_, which Andersson defines both as “the collected works of a writer” and as “the expression of consciousness” that the collected works can be seen to embody. As he explains, “The _œuvre_, then, embodies the mind of an author; or rather, it is the textual creation in which a _cogito_ or an aspect thereof is manifested” (46). But as manifested here (by “or an aspect thereof”), what he means by “_cogito_,” a term he uses fre-
quently, is not precisely clear—possibly, in part, because he is pointing toward something inherently difficult to articulate. The word, of course, literally means (in Latin), “I think.” In Descartes’ Discourse on Method, it is used as an indubitable proof: “Je pense, donc je suis” (or, “Cogito ergo sum”); in Sartre’s “cogito préréflexif” (“pre-reflective cogito”), it signifies a generalized awareness of consciousness that accompanies every specific intentional act of consciousness such that we experience consciousness as self-consciousness. Andersson bends these toward something more closely akin to a “poetic self” (or even a “self” inherent in the body-of-poetry).

Andersson’s “thematic criticism” aligns itself with formalism in its avoidance of the biographical and historical, connects with the genetic in its interest in the poetic self, and, in the “thematic” aspect, bears some inverse analogy to reader response. That is, Andersson is looking for something similar to an “identity theme” in Stevens’ collected works. Theorist Norman Holland maintains that the way a reader responds to a work of literature reflects his or her “identity theme”—a complex of personal, or individual, concerns that show up in one’s responses to any particular object of attention. Andersson’s “thematic criticism,” applying this to the œuvre rather than the reader, is “thematic” in that it examines the poet’s body of work for a complex of concerns that manifest themselves as a kind of poetic personality, regardless of the object of poetic meditation.

Andersson identifies phenomenology and existentialism as providing the philosophical underpinnings for thematic criticism in general and specifically for his own thematic-critical examination of Stevens’ poetry. His approach is phenomenological in that it “brackets” some important “reality” claims, including questions related to the reality of Stevens’ life and times and possible influences on his work by other writers. He treats Stevens’ poetic corpus as a “phenomenal field” in that he takes the poems as they present themselves to the reader and not as a gateway to some understanding beyond the scope of the poems themselves. But the philosophical connections he proposes do reach far deeper into the poetry than the fairly simple and straightforward concept of bracketing.

The overarching theme that Andersson discerns in Stevens’ poetry is the trajectory of “descent,” “nothingness,” and “ascent”—a progression that he associates with Husserlian phenomenological “reductions” in the descent phase and with Sartrean philosophy throughout. He describes the “descent” and “ascent” phases as follows:

Generally speaking, the descent refers to the quest for an aesthetic nothingness of which the ascent is the outcome. More accurately put, the descent will certainly prove to include an imagery of mere spatial movements downwards, but also, on a more metaphorical level, the urge toward annihilation, silence, and negation. The ascent, similarly, indeed involves an upward spatialization, but it also offers, perhaps more importantly, various countermovements to the descent; that is, the affirmation of life, the growth of imaginative consciousness, the rise from the dead and the silent. (52)
The cycle Andersson describes is fundamentally the death and rebirth motif, with “nothingness” as the “turning point” (52) at which the clearing away resulting from the “descent” phase yields the opportunity for aesthetic “ascent”: “Stevens’ vision of nothingness, then, will include the rebirth of poetry and speech, as his aesthetic nothingness provides a possible re-creation of self and world” (118). This sounds much like the familiar cycle of decreation/creation, or Nietzsche’s “Three Metamophoses of the Spirit,” or Northrop Frye’s “quest myth,” or the cycle of the seasons that forms the basis for various (other) “vegetation myths.” Andersson, however, gives a new twist to these familiar cyclical motifs by recourse to Sartrean philosophy, with interestingly little attention to Sartrean aesthetics regarding poetry as such (notable especially since Sartre’s idea of poetry—very different from his idea of prose—offers compatibilities with Stevens’ aesthetic ruminations).

As Andersson delineates, for Sartre, “imagination brings to us what is the negation of the real” (58), thus connecting into the “descent” and “nothingness” phases. He quotes from Sartre, “‘the imaginative act is at once constitutive, isolating, and annihilating,’” and comments, “This doubleness of imagination of being both constitutive and annihilating, is, then, what lies at the heart of Stevens’ descending vision as well” (114). Thus, Sartrean philosophy enters into both downward and upward phases. But it is in the “nothingness” phase (not surprisingly, since Sartre is best known for his book Being and Nothingness) that the Sartrean connection is most visible. For Sartre, consciousness does, as Andersson claims, assert itself as a “negative moment” in relation to the “positivity” of what is “in itself” (i.e., Sartre’s “en-soi”). It is this “negativity” that enables us to imagine, for example, what might be, as opposed to what simply is—opening the possibility for meaningful action and imagination (i.e., “negativity” is the source of our freedom from “the given”). This Sartrean existential-phenomenological approach to Stevens is substantially more congenial than Heideggerian existential-phenomenological-ontological readings. It works to accommodate the concept of fictionality (and the accompanying aesthetic transcendence) so central to Stevens’ poetic corpus—and, by Andersson’s innovation, provides a Sartrean analogy between the “pre-reflective cogito” and the concept of Stevens’ oeuvre.

Although Andersson mostly postpones direct discussion of the subject of fictionality until his postscript, he does end the book with an examination of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” whose tripartite structure is conveniently fit to Andersson’s tripartite thematic (“descent,” “nothingness,” “ascent”). The text of the poem itself, however, expresses a somewhat un-Sartrean inclination: “The fiction of an absolute,” which is very different from the philosophical argument that the “Absolute” is, in fact, a fiction. In the end (and to Andersson’s credit), Andersson and Sartre yield the floor to the Stevensian vision of such a fiction: a world that, from the achieved aesthetic perspective, “will have stopped revolving except in crystal”—the words with which Andersson’s study concludes—while the Sartrean world, one could say, continues to unfold in the perpetual “negations” (Prufrock’s “visions and revisions”? ) that constitute the activity that is the center/“structure” of human consciousness.
Andersson’s project includes analyses of most of Stevens’ longer poems and many shorter ones. Some are, like the critical works, dispatched with a summary judgment. For instance, “Harmonium is basically devoted to earthly particularity, to the reductive descent of the mind on its quest for the world’s thingness” (166). Others receive extended treatment—“Owl’s Cover” and “Chocorua to Its Neighbor,” for example, and the shorter poems “Evening without Angels” and “The Latest Freed Man.” Not surprisingly, however, Andersson is at his best when he transcends Sartre and even the issue of an overarching, or underlying, Stevensian oeuvre (Andersson’s usage). At such times, especially, he proves a close reader, illuminating Stevens’ oeuvre in the traditional sense.

Christine E. Wharton and James S. Leonard
The Citadel

Lyric Poetry: The Pain and the Pleasure of Words.

The move toward theory in literary studies that has occurred over the last couple of critical generations was the result of old procedures and unified narratives of progress breaking down. The paradigm shift has been salutary in many respects, though there are hints that certain branches of the theoretical tree have begun to wither and lose their leaves. Mutlu Konuk Blasing’s study, Lyric Poetry: The Pain and the Pleasure of Words, seeks to use a specifically deconstructive approach in order to renovate the way we understand the language of lyric poems. Our conventional model of the lyric remains an artifact of romanticism and the New Criticism, for which, according to Jed Rasula in The American Poetry Wax Museum, the lyric was a “privileged object of analysis.” As a method of slicing away that privilege, Rasula invokes Bruno Latour’s notion of “metrology,” which holds that “the operational tools of the critic need to appear more refined as well as more extensive than the rhetorical and conceptual parameters of a given text” (83). Blasing’s Lyric Poetry is concerned, too, with slicing away old-fashioned ways of reading lyric poems, though it embodies as well a strong urge to establish its own dominance over the texts it considers.

Despite its high deconstructive mode, Lyric Poetry has a decidedly old-fashioned feel, from its obsessive fascination with the lyric to its overall organization, which consists of four chapters of theory followed by chapters on high modernist icons Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and Wallace Stevens. There is an additional chapter on Anne Sexton that feels tacked-on, a gesture toward broader relevance that fails to complete itself. In the Introduction, Blasing writes, “My choice of poets is neither inevitable nor entirely arbitrary. . . . I chose to discuss Four Quartets and the Cantos because they are works with ideological content, and there exists a body of canonical criticism on them by which to measure the difference of readings” (17). My chief reservation about the book is that it is more concerned with measuring one critical approach against another than it is concerned with understanding the poems and poets that are its putative subject.
Yet the project is worthwhile. The idea of the lyric poem as the unified utterance of a single singer does not provide a good description of actual lyric practice or reception. Blasing’s assertion that “[t]he lyric ‘I’ makes the communal personality of people audible” (12) is a good place to start. At least since William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience* in the late eighteenth century, the lyric poem in English has been characterized not so much by unity as by a barely contained centripetal force constantly threatening to tear the lyric to pieces. Even an apparently straightforward poem such as Blake’s “The Echoing Green” conceals a disorienting shift of point of view between viewer and viewed, speaker and participant in the poem’s action. The lyrics of Wallace Stevens habitually withdraw what they have revealed and those of John Ashbery introduce so many shifts of grammatical reference as to undermine any sort of epistemological or ontological certainty. Clearly, we need a more subtle and capacious understanding of the lyric poem than the one we have inherited from the New Critics. The lyric, we might say, is self-deconstructive.

Blasing’s central contention is that the lyric must be understood in terms of the nonrational, material qualities of its language, with particular emphasis on literary form, rather than as the utterance of a personality contained in the first-person pronoun. This is not an entirely new idea, of course. Robert Frost spoke of “sentence sound” that carries a meaning or feeling independent of the rational sense of the sentence. Blasing quotes Frost’s remark that “the best place to get the abstract sound of sense is from voices behind a door that cuts off the words” (59). Blasing writes, “Poetic language cannot be understood as deviating from or opposing a norm or rational language, because poetic forms clearly accommodate referential use of language and rational discourse. But they position most complex thought processes and rigorous figurative logic as figures on the ground of processes that are in no way rational” (3). “No way” is rhetorical overkill. Surely rationality is not entirely excluded from the poet’s process of composition. Still, it is an important point. Eliot and Stevens, especially, understand the imperial power of the individual syllable.

“The lyric ‘I’ makes the communal personality of people audible,” writes Blasing, yet her approach leaves little or no room for political, or even social, considerations of the lyric, except insofar as a neo-Freudian reading of the psychosexual self can be considered political or social. Blasing writes, “The exaggerated expectations placed on poetry in the nineteenth century leads to a kind of criticism that views poetry as a pretext for discourses compelled by other agendas. . . . If lyric poetry is dismissed today as an anachronistic, nineteenth-century phenomenon, the criteria used for this judgment are nineteenth-century, moralistic, normative criteria following from expectations that poetry do something other than poetry—the expectations of a last-ditch humanism” (5). The solution is to return to a formalism that draws the whole world inside language, including the body. There is much about the materiality of language and about the body, but the body, in Blasing’s way of reading, becomes strangely abstract and immaterial. Everything that is solid melts into language. Perhaps this is an inevitable conclusion, but it is one that makes me, as a poet, profoundly uncomfortable.
Too often Blasing’s prose slips into incomprehensible abstraction: “Leclaire proposes an alternation between the void and the letter as formative of the psychosexual subject; Nietzsche addresses, on a different scale, an alternation between a Dionysian void and the Apollonian formulation of the text of the world of appearances to locate the lyric subject. In this section, I will focus on the operations of poetic language itself to read the subject function as, again, an alternation between the void and the letter, between the annulment of the subject and the effacement of this annulment” (87). In discussing Elizabeth Bishop’s poem “In the Waiting Room,” Blasing writes: “In all cases it is a question of what is inside and what is outside the borders of a system. In language, it is the body and its cry that are outside; one’s ‘inside’ and the sounds from the inside place outside the system, on the inside of which are pronouns and names and men and women in their proper clothes” (87). Reading this, I felt like a fly that has been crawling around on the endless surface of a Klein bottle.

When Blasing writes about specific poetic texts, she is at her best, though there is a disinterested quality in her tone that one might mistake for disdain. The chapter on Wallace Stevens is the best in the book, focusing more effectively on close readings of specific poems than do the parallel chapters on Pound and Eliot. It is ironic that a book that sets itself the task of freeing lyric poetry’s language from the critical net in which it has become enmeshed should so thoroughly weave a new net in which to capture it, though in the end, the lyric slips away in any case. Of Stevens’ “Red Man Reading,” she writes: “Disappointed with the final poverty of life and death, the ghosts come back to hear sounds. Their desire to feel, to have physical sensations, returns them to hear the large red man reading. And the subject matter—the concrete pots and pans and tulips and the abstract ‘being and its expressings’—is indifferent to those who have returned to hear the man ‘reading, aloud,’ to ‘hear his phrases’ ” (145–46). Why should the ghosts get all the pleasure? Blasing concludes: “Poetry is not the literal characters nor the vatic lines but their realization as physical sensations in sounds that touch the hearers and take on, for them, the shape of ‘things as they are’ ” (146). But not for us, poor humans, apparently.

Is it among the functions of literary criticism to advance the art of poetry? Is a book such as this of any use to poets? Does it have any such responsibility? These are questions that occurred to me several times in preparing my response to Lyric Poetry. Did poets in the 1950s find, say, Cleanth Brooks’s The Well-Wrought Urn a corrective to their practice? Perhaps some did, but they are the poets we have now forgotten, one suspects. Poets, then, who are those most concerned with lyric language, will not find much of use here. Criticism, of course, is not written for poets, but for readers. Blasing demolishes the metrology of romantic expectations and New Critical insistence on the isolated text, but replaces these with a system in which the inhuman play of language underwrites the lyric. “[T]he subject in language is not ‘human’ in any ordinary sense of the term, and we need to think poetry outside humanism” (9). This reader is not convinced this is either true or useful.

Joseph Duemer
Clarkson University
News and Comments

Appreciation goes to Robin G. Schulze, who arranged the 2005 MLA panel on Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore that culminated in the three essays on the poets that appear in this issue.

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On October 1, 2007, a Pennsylvania historical marker honoring Wallace Stevens was placed in front of his boyhood home in Reading, Pa. According to an article in the Reading Eagle:

About 150 people gathered for the noontime ceremony at the Stevens house, now a chiropractor’s office. The crowd spilled over onto Fifth Street, part of which had been cordoned off by city workers.

Standing on the steps of 323 N. Fifth St., the three-story row house where Stevens grew up, Kutztown University professor Heather Thomas recited a poem [“The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain”] inspired by a childhood journal and the poet’s walks on Mount Penn.

Mayor Tom McMahon and Berks County Commissioner Judith L. Schwank wrestled with a somewhat uncooperative shroud before yanking it off to reveal a blue-and-gold Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission marker.

“Wallace Stevens was a major 20th century American poet who was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for his collected poems in 1955,” the marker says. It mentions three works, “Bantams in the Pinewoods,” “Harmonium” and “Auroras of Autumn.”

“Stevens combined poetic language with serious philosophical ideas,” the marker notes.

The unveiling doubled as the kickoff event for Reading Reads: The Greater Reading Literary Festival.

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Adam Zagajewski was the featured poet at the University of Connecticut’s 44th annual Wallace Stevens Program. He read at Storrs on March 13th and in Hartford on March 14th. The Hartford reading took place this year at Greater Hartford Classical Magnet School. This annual event is sponsored by the Hartford Friends and Enemies of Wallace Stevens.

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Carmen Blatt won the 2007 Wallace Stevens Scholarship. The $1000 prize is awarded yearly to a Hartford high school student who exhibits exemplary ability as a poet. The contest is sponsored by the Hartford Friends and Enemies of Wallace Stevens.
The Wallace Stevens Walk project progresses apace. Funds raised thus far top $43,000, and the first stone was unveiled at the Classical Magnet School in Hartford in March. Architect John Orofino and stonemason John Zito participated in the event, where a letter of endorsement by Connecticut Governor Jodi Rell was read. Six more stones have been ordered, and at least four of them are expected to be installed by late autumn this year. The stone markers, each with a panel from “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” will be placed at various locations along Stevens’ walk from his home to the office.

The 10th annual Wallace Stevens Memorial Poetry Reading was held on Saturday, June 23, 2007, at 1 p.m. in the Pond House of Elizabeth Park, Hartford. This year’s reading was in memory of Hugh Ogden, poet and professor at Trinity College, who organized this event since its start. Featured readers were Dennis Barone, Lonnie Black, Christine Palm, John Orofino, Dan Schnaidt, and Phil Tegeler. Sponsored by the Hartford Friends and Enemies of Wallace Stevens, the event is held annually during Rose Festival Weekend in late June.

James Longenbach was the featured speaker at the 12th annual Wallace Stevens Birthday Bash at the Hartford Public Library on Saturday, October 6th, 6:30-10 p.m. There were wine, music, and hors d’oeuvres before the program, and birthday cake and champagne following. This event is sponsored by the Connecticut Center for the Book at the Hartford Public Library and by the Hartford Friends and Enemies of Wallace Stevens.

On October 18, 2007, the Hartford Public Library sponsored a talk by Beverly Coyle on the relationship between Wallace Stevens and the Cuban poet and editor of Origenes, José Rodríguez-Feo. Coyle based her talk on the extensive correspondence between the two that she edited, along with Alan Filreis, in Secretaries of the Moon: The Letters of Wallace Stevens and José Rodríguez-Feo. Coyle is an author, playwright, and member of Yale University’s Divinity School visiting faculty.

An impressive number of fine Stevens books and original letters have appeared on the market in the past twelve months. A single, typewritten letter from Wallace Stevens to Ernest Kroll in 1952, acknowledging and praising a volume of poems, was listed for $950 in Catalog 206 (December 2006) from Gerard A. J. Stodolski, Inc., of Bedford, N.H. New York bookseller James Cummins offered (for $27,500 in April 2007) a group of 11 typewritten letters (1936–55) to Alfred A. Knopf and to Knopf’s publicity director, about the National Poetry Award and other matters. In its June 7, 2007, auction, Sotheby’s London offered two first editions of Harmonium: lot 98, which included a typed
letter, was expected to fetch £3,000–5,000, while lot 99 carried an estimate of £2,000–2,500. In the October 26, 2006, Leslie Hindman auction catalog, lot 244, a copy of the 1985 Arion Press edition of Poems was estimated to bring $2,500–3,500. Another copy of this edition was listed in William Reese Company’s catalog 253 (March 2007), priced at $3,750, and the same catalog offered the 1966 Letters of Wallace Stevens for $300.

During the past year, the Stevens collection of W. Stuart Debenham has come to market. Brillig Books (Wilkingsburg, Pa.) is handling the sale through the internet Advanced Book Exchange (ABEBooks). Debenham was a Yale librarian, mentioned in Edelstein’s Bibliography as owning one of two copies of Stevens’ 1955 National Book Award Speech (A24). This mimeograph document, along with a letter (to Debenham from Norman Holmes Pearson) sold for $350. Also, from the Debenham sale: Three Academic Pieces, signed issue (I to LII), $10,000, and a handwritten letter, referring to Stevens’ poem “Two at Norfolk,” $3,500. Handwritten letters are quite scarce, and no carbons exist in the Huntington Library. In a private sale, Owl’s Clover (Presentation issue, 20 copies) recently went for $17,500. This is one of Stevens’ rarest and most expensive books; it was last offered at the 1981 Hendesy auction.

** Camilla Burgess, a psychotherapist and an artist, has produced a small booklet illustrating “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.” The poem, which appealed to her for its “sense of humor and simple imagery that conveys deep and mysterious meanings,” inspired her to paint each of the panels. She then assembled them, along with the text, into an attractive, 8 1/2” x 4” spiral-bound booklet. There are 14 color illustrations. The cost is $15, plus shipping. For further information, write to her at: camilla.burgess@rogers.com.

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A Poets’ Dinner, presented by the William Carlos Williams Society, the Ezra Pound Society, and the Wallace Stevens Society, took place on 29 December 2006 in Philadelphia, during the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association. The dinner honored seven modernist poets born in and/or educated in Pennsylvania, including not only Williams, Pound and Stevens, but also Gertrude Stein, H. D., Marianne Moore, and James Laughlin.

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Blogging librarians called upon Wallace Stevens to provide structure for their view of the multiple roles of libraries past, present, and future. A blog from five staffers at OCLC (Online Computer Library Center, an international union catalog and cataloging consortium) posted “13 Ways of Looking at a Public Library,” including such roles as a technology center, a resource for government forms, a research center, and a social center (with cafés and lounges).

Sara S. Hodson
The Huntington Library
Announcing
Two Wallace Stevens Society Programs at MLA
Chicago, December 27–30, 2007

558. *Opus Posthumous*: Celebrating Fifty Years

Saturday, December 29
3:30–4:45 p.m., Addams, Hyatt Regency Chicago
Program arranged by the Wallace Stevens Society

*Presiding*: Bart P. Eeckhout, Univ. of Antwerp

3. “*Opus Posthumous*, Posterity, and ‘Adagia,’ ” Gary Morrison, Middle Tennessee State Univ.

781. Wallace Stevens and France

Sunday, December 30
1:45–3:00 p.m., Plaza Ballroom A, Hyatt Regency Chicago
Program arranged by the Wallace Stevens Society

*Presiding*: Anne Luyat, Univ. of Avignon

Roundtable Discussion

2. “‘Light Is Speech’: France as Freedom in Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore,” Taffy Martin, Univ. of Poitiers
3. “Notes Toward a Deleuzian Reading of Wallace Stevens,” Axel Nesme, Univ. of Lyon 2
4. “‘Chez-Moi’: Stevens at Home in the French Language,” Juliette A. Utard, Univ. of Paris 4
Wallace Stevens is a major American poet and a central figure in modernist studies and twentieth-century poetry. This Companion introduces students to his work. An international team of distinguished contributors presents a unified picture of Stevens’ poetic achievement. The Introduction explains why Stevens is considered among the world’s great poets and offers specific guidance on how to read and appreciate his poetry. A brief biographical sketch anchors Stevens in the real world and illuminates important personal and intellectual influences. The essays that follow chart Stevens’ poetic career and his affinities with both earlier and contemporary writers, artists, and philosophers. Other essays introduce students to the peculiarity and distinctiveness of Stevens’ voice and style. They explain prominent themes in his work and explore the nuances of his aesthetic theory. Featuring a detailed chronology and guide to further reading, this Companion provides all the information a student or scholar of Stevens will need.

CONTENTS

Prices subject to change.
Online Concordance to Wallace Stevens’ Poetry

Instructions

Search for: firecat

- Match case
- Match ALL terms
- Match exact phrase
- Word frequency & rank

Match ANY term

Begin Search

Your query matched 5 lines:

Earthly Anecdote

line 3: A firecat bristled in the way.
line 9: Because of the firecat.
line 13: Because of the firecat.
line 15: The firecat went leaping,
line 19: Later, the firecat closed his bright eyes

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