

The Wallace Stevens Journal

To Miss Gage.

Froebel be hang'd! And Pestalozzi - pooh!
No wearied Pedagogy can aspire
To thrill these thousands - through and through -
Or touch their thin souls with immortal fire.

Only in such as you the spirit gleams
With the rich beauty that compassion gives:
Children no science - but a world of dreams
Whose fearful futures of the Real live.

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The Wallace Stevens Journal

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Seeking the Sibyl of *Harmonium*: Wallace Stevens and Sybil Gage

WILLIAM T. FORD

IN DECEMBER 1950, Wallace Stevens wrote to poet Richard Eberhart at Harvard:

I enjoyed dropping in on you last Saturday and seeing how human Cambridge has become. . . .

After leaving you, I walked through Hilliard Street, the name of which seemed to be familiar, until it came out on Cambridge Common by Radcliffe. At the point where it comes out Radcliffe is on the left. At the right there is an old dwelling where one of the most attractive girls in Cambridge used to live: Sybil Gage. If your wife is a native of Cambridge, she may have heard of Sybil Gage, although I am speaking of a time long before your wife was born. Her father was a friend of W. G. Peckham, a New York lawyer, in whose office I used to work at one time, and the two of them, and some others, were, I believe, the founders of the *Harvard Advocate*. But my principal interest in Mr. Gage, who was dead when I lived in Cambridge, was the fact that he was the founder of *Sybil*. A few years after I had left Cambridge I was a guest at Peckham's place in the Adirondacks and who should turn up but this angel; so that instead of being a street that I had never heard of Hilliard Street turns out to be a street that I passed every day. (*L* 700)¹

In *Souvenirs and Prophecies: The Young Wallace Stevens*, Holly Stevens provides more information about Sybil Gage: "I recently learned," she writes, "that she had become Sybil Weddle and moved to California. My informant described her 'as a gracious, highly intelligent woman, much interested in literature. She was especially fond of poetry' " (102). Holly's informant, Lowell Tozer, an English professor at San Diego State College (now University), went on to say:

"Sybil told me that she and her family used to go up to the Adirondacks in the summer, and that there she met Wallace

Stevens. What there was between them she didn't say, though from your father's letter to Richard Eberhart it is obvious that he was smitten with Sybil. She told me that she had been studying Froebel and Pestalozzi, and was enthusiastic about them. She had been telling Wallace Stevens about them, and what great contributions they had made to children's education. According to Sybil, your father was a bit skeptical about the two men, and wrote her the enclosed poem, both to kid her about her enthusiasm, and to pay her a very pretty compliment.

TO MISS GAGE

Froebel be hanged! And Pestalozzi—pooh!
No weazened Pedagogy can aspire
To thrill these thousands—through and through—
Or touch their thin souls with immortal fire.

Only in such as you the spirit gleams
With the rich beauty that compassions give:
Children no science—but a world of dreams
Where fearful futures of the Real live.

—WS" (SP 102–03)

Holly continues:

Knowing my father's fondness for a real Sibyl adds a dimension to his use of that word in "The Sail of Ulysses" (1954):

What is the shape of the sibyl? Not,
For a change, the englistered woman, seated
In colorings harmonious, dewed and dashed
By them:

Despite the fact that "All that glisters is not gold," we must remember that my father referred to Sybil Gage as an "angel."

The poem "To Miss Gage" is dated July 1902. It was shortly after my father's return from the Adirondacks that he began to keep a third notebook, headed "Wallace Stevens: Journal. 1902." It does not refer to the lady, however. (SP 102–03)

Holly's correspondent Lowell Tozer had met Sybil at meetings of the Society of Friends (Quakers) in La Jolla in the late 1950s, where they had discussed their mutual interest in literature. Before her death on June 15, 1966, Sybil had given Tozer her autograph book, along with Stevens' handwritten poem "To Miss Gage" and a snapshot of Stevens,² which Sybil had

retained all her life. "She had kept the picture all those years, she said, as they had been sweethearts," recalls Tozer, who goes on to say, "Sybil never did say why she and Wallace Stevens had not married." Of their 1902 meeting in the Adirondacks, which both warmly recalled so many years later, almost nothing is definitely known.

Who was Sybil Gage? What became of her? Why did Stevens make a point of recalling their brief Adirondack meeting in his 1950 letter to Eberhart? I searched the Social Security Death Index (on the Internet) and found the following (the correct date of death is June 15, 1966):

Sybil G. Weddle, birth 21 October 1880, death 15 August 1966.
Last residence: 92037 (La Jolla, San Diego, CA)

Sybil's birth date, October 21, 1880, made her slightly more than a year younger than Stevens (October 2, 1879). And something else: from Voragine's *Golden Legend*, I recalled that October 21 is the traditional feast day of Saint Ursula and her companions, the subject of Stevens' 1914 poem, "Cy Est Pourtraicte, Madame Ste Ursule, et Les Unze Mille Vierges," the earliest of the *Harmonium* poems. Thus began my quest for Sybil Gage.

YOUNG WALLACE STEVENS

In June 1902, Wallace Stevens, age 22, had just completed his first year of studies at the New York Law School in lower Manhattan. He was living alone in a small apartment, a "hall bedroom" at 124 E. 24th Street, just above the Gramercy Park area (SP 97). New York Law School's practice-oriented course of study required that students obtain clerkships and put in time working in a law office. Stevens obtained a position with Manhattan attorney William Gibbs (W. G.) Peckham (1849–1924). A graduate of Harvard (1867), Peckham had made his fortune and reputation as a trial and appellate attorney, primarily representing aggrieved landowners in New York City elevated railway litigation. As one of the founders of the *Harvard Advocate*, Peckham maintained an interest in the college, wrote for Harvard publications, and occasionally attended the annual dinners of the past *Harvard Advocate* editors, where he might have met Stevens, who was *Advocate* editor in 1900. In any event, the two men evidently hit it off, and Stevens was a frequent guest at Peckham's residence in Westfield, New Jersey, and, in 1902, at his summer home on Indian Lake in the Adirondacks.

INDIAN LAKE, THE ADIRONDACKS

Indian Lake is in the southern Adirondack region of upstate New York, roughly ninety miles northwest of Albany, the state capital and home of the New York Court of Appeals, where Peckham had frequent business. The lake is fourteen miles long, approximately a mile and a quarter across at its widest reach. At the north end, a stone dam and causeway maintain the lake level, controlling the flow of water into Indian River, a small,

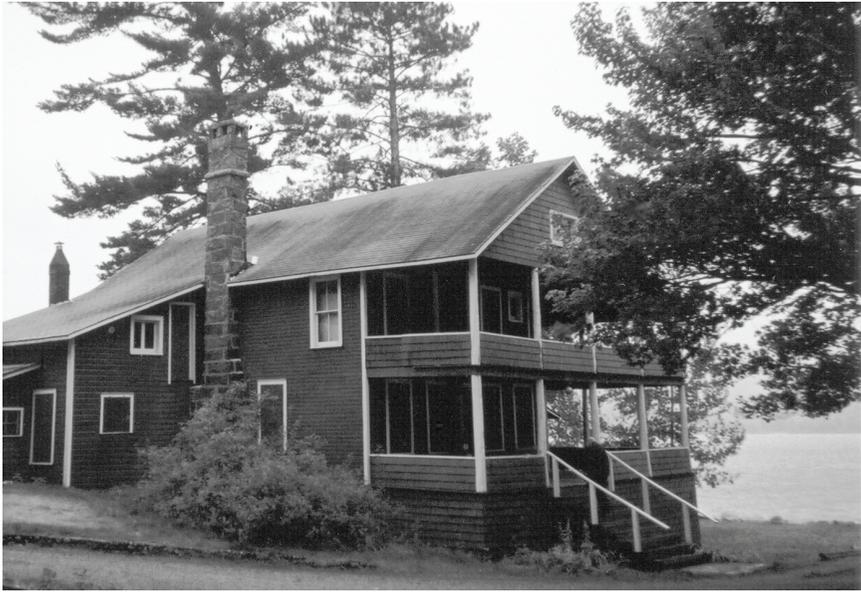


Fig. 1. W. G. Peckham's lodge on Indian Lake in the Adirondacks. Photograph by Deirdre D. Ford (September 2001).

rapidly flowing tributary of the Hudson. In 1902, the Adirondacks had no paved roads, telephones, or electricity. The nearest rail line terminated in North Creek, eighteen miles east of the lake. To reach Indian Lake from Manhattan required going by boat or the New York Central Railroad to Saratoga Springs. From there, the Adirondack Railroad ran to North Creek. The final eighteen miles to Indian Lake was by stagecoach or wagon.

Peckham's summer home, which still stands, is a two-and-a-half-story lodge with wraparound balconies on the first and second floors. It is on the western shore of the lake, two-and-a-half miles south of Indian Lake Village. A contemporary photograph shows an imposing structure, not far from the water's edge, with several outbuildings (see Fig. 1). The lodge is being restored and is currently operated as the Twin Coves Resort.³ Today, the Indian Lake area retains much of its rustic character. There are hiking trails on the low mountains on either side of the lake. Boating is one of the lake's primary attractions. In pre-outboard times, sail-rigged canoes were a regular Adirondack conveyance. Several small islands, suitable for picnicking, are within easy reach of Peckham's former property. Deer roamed freely and even today are considered a nuisance, foraging in gardens kept by local residents. Although convenient to New York City, the Adirondacks in 1902 were a wild, romantic place, as Stevens recalled in a letter to Henry Church in 1939:

On the basis of very few visits, I should say that the Adirondacks had it all over the mountains of Northern New England. The

more celebrated resorts in both belong to a past generation. The Adirondacks are wilder and there are more of them. Moreover, they have that definitely Western, slightly Northern aspect that is American. (L 339)

Indian Lake was (and remains) an idyllic place. Its islands may well have recalled W. B. Yeats's "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," alluded to in Stevens' "Page from a Tale." Indian Lake itself is evocative of the lake imagery that figures in several *Harmonium* poems, such as "Sunday Morning," "Le Monocole de Mon Oncle," and "The Comedian as the Letter C," as well as several later works, most notably Stevens' long 1942 poem, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction": "Perhaps / The truth depends on a walk around a lake."⁴



Fig. 2. Sybil Gage, c. 1909. Photograph courtesy of John K. Howat.

SYBIL GAGE

Sybil Gage, "one of the most attractive girls in Cambridge," lived at 5 Garden Street (now part of the Radcliffe College campus) in a house owned by her maternal grandfather, the Rev. Joseph Henry Allen (1820–1898), a Unitarian clergyman, Latin scholar, and sometime Harvard Divinity School faculty member. A photograph taken a few years after Sybil's meeting with Stevens shows her as a striking brunette with a confident smile (see Fig. 2). During his student days at Harvard (1897–1900), Stevens had lodgings at 54 Garden Street (several blocks beyond the Radcliffe campus) and would have passed Sybil's house regularly on his way to and from classes.

Contemporary records are sparse, but they indicate that Sybil was the liveliest and most attractive of four sisters, all of whom attended the Berkeley Street School, a Cambridge academy for young women (Piper 43). The school not only taught literature and languages, but was also considered a "progressive" institution, with teachers advocating rights for women, particularly women's suffrage. (Massachusetts did not grant women the right to vote until 1919.)

Berkeley Street School students frequently went on to Radcliffe. Sybil's two older sisters, Margaret and Anna, were Radcliffe graduates, and her younger sister, Miriam, attended Radcliffe for a time, but there is no record that Sybil was ever a student there. (A relative later recalled that Sybil "was a graduate of an eastern school of social work,"⁵ but nothing definite has been discovered.) Sybil's enthusiasm for Friedrich Froebel and Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi indicates that she was planning a career in elementary education. Family tradition has Sybil teaching for at least one year in a western state, possibly Wyoming. Some time during the early years of the twentieth century, Sybil visited an uncle, Russell Carpenter Allen (the youngest of the Allen children), who had moved to the San Diego area in 1883. At the time Sybil met Stevens in the Adirondacks, she might have been preparing to depart for Wyoming or California.

THE SUMMER OF 1902

We do not know how long Stevens and Sybil were together at Indian Lake. At most, it might have been two weeks.⁶ Both recalled their encounter nearly fifty years later, and it is likely they spent considerable time together walking, boating, and discussing their interests, families, and career plans. Topics of conversation almost certainly would have included life in Cambridge. Sybil was well educated and well read. Her grandfather, Rev. Joseph Allen, had done scholarly work on Ovid and Virgil. As one of four unmarried daughters (and with an absent father), she likely would have been familiar with such works as Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and Jane Austen's novels. Curiously, almost immediately after his return to New York, Stevens filled out his Austen collection by purchasing *Emma* (Bates 50).

Both of them should have been familiar with Henry James's Harvard novel of women's suffrage, *The Bostonians* (1886), and both might have recognized themselves (a little) in the relationship between young New York lawyer Basil Ransom and Boston suffragette Verena Tarrant. Sybil would also have talked about her family and her plans for visiting the West. Her uncle, Russell Allen, had established a considerable lemon-growing operation near San Diego, and his wife, Ella Copeland (Allen), was in need of assistance with her four children as well as companionship, as Allen was frequently absent attending to his business, the Sweetwater Fruit Company.

Although Sybil was aware of the prominence of the Allen family, whose maternal forebears included the Clarks, the Wares, and even John Hancock, Sybil was more interested in the much less renowned Gage family. Sybil probably told Stevens of her paternal grandfather, Charles Pinckney Gage, a physician and landowner, who had settled near Hopkinton and Concord, New Hampshire. Her paternal grandmother, Nancy Sibley, was also from a leading family and a cousin of Harvard librarian John Langdon Sibley (1804–1885). Sybil's grandfather had been named after a well-known colonial politician, Charles Pinckney of South Carolina.

Lowell Tozer recalled that Sybil had expressed the belief that she was a direct descendant of General Thomas Gage (1719–1787), the British military governor of Massachusetts at the time of the American Revolution. This would not have been possible, as the American Gage family had been in Massachusetts and New Hampshire since the mid-seventeenth century, but Sybil likely believed that her ancestors were, in fact, part of the aristocratic English family, the Gages of Firle, Sussex (as was General Thomas Gage). One of the eighteenth-century English Gages was responsible for the importation into Great Britain of a popular variety of French plum, which had become known in England and America as the Green Gage or Greengage plum (a most delicious plum, as young Stevens might have observed).

An earlier Thomas Gage, a Dominican priest, had lived in the New World during the early seventeenth century, residing in southern Mexico and Yucatan, and visiting Mexico City, Oaxaca, Tehuantepec, Chiapas, and other communities in Yucatan and Guatemala. Gage had written a book concerning his travels and experiences in the New World, and even included a glossary of words in the Mayan language or the local dialect spoken by the remnants of the Mayan Indians.⁷

Sybil most likely mentioned to Stevens her father, Charles Sibley Gage, who had graduated from Harvard with Peckham in 1867. During his college years, Charles Gage had failed to devote sufficient time to his studies and consequently was “rusticated” for a term with the Allen family. After graduation he engaged in the insurance business, studied law, and was admitted to practice in New York in 1869. In 1872, he married Lucy Clark Allen and subsequently moved to 65 Joralemon Street in Brooklyn Heights (then, as now, an extremely fashionable address). During the 1870s, Gage published poetry and short stories in the literary publications of the day, his work appearing alongside that of Henry James and Clarence Edward Stedman. Either Sybil or Peckham might have had some of Gage’s work at Indian Lake. Among the poems published was “Annunciation,” a poem to the spring written in couplets. Stevens might have recalled that some of Gage’s work had also appeared in the *Harvard Advocate* for 1900. These poems might have been published at the request of Peckham, who maintained a continuing interest in *Advocate* affairs.

If Sybil had told Stevens her father was dead (recall that Stevens mentions in his letter to Eberhart, “Mr. Gage . . . was dead when I lived in Cambridge”), this would have been a permissible fiction at the time to avoid the subject of insanity in the immediate family. Charles Sibley Gage had been incapacitated by mental illness since 1883. Although Gage’s mental difficulties had initially been attributed to overwork,⁸ his mother, Nancy Sibley (Gage), had also developed mental illness shortly after Charles’s birth and spent the remainder of her life in institutions, including McLean Asylum in Somerville, Massachusetts, and as an inmate of the New Hampshire Asylum (later State Hospital), where she died in 1887. Her descent

into dementia and idiocy was chronicled by her cousin, John Langdon Sibley (1804–1885).⁹

WALLACE STEVENS AFTER INDIAN LAKE

Probably near the end of July 1902, Stevens wrote his poem “To Miss Gage.” Aside from the 1950 letter to Eberhart, there is no further mention of Stevens’ and Sybil’s encounter at Indian Lake. The following year, 1903, Stevens and Peckham took a journey to Peckham’s ranch near Fort Steele in British Columbia for a hunting trip that Stevens extensively recounted in his journal (*SP* 117–26). In June 1904, Stevens was admitted to practice law in New York. In July 1904, on a visit to Reading, Pennsylvania, he met Elsie Viola Moll [Kachel], and as Holly Stevens puts it, “Despite his Journal entry of July 26, 1900, which indicates that he would never marry, Stevens soon found himself deeply in love” (*L* 77). The courtship was a lengthy one. Stevens was attempting to establish himself in the practice of law in New York City, but he was not successful. In 1908, he joined the American Bonding Company as a member of its New York legal staff, and this became the first of his associations with insurance law. On Elsie’s 22nd birthday, June 5, 1908, Stevens presented her with the first of two small books of poems, which would be known as the “Little June Books.” The following year he presented the second, entitled the “Little June Book WS to EVM June 5, 1909.”

By May 1909, Stevens was living at 117 W. 11th Street in Greenwich Village. He spent many evenings at the Astor Library and noted that he had been looking at Dante’s *A New Life*. He commented particularly on Dante’s adoration of Beatrice:

Dante’s “New Life” is a strange book. I have had it for a long time, looked through it often—and never read it. But I know what it is about. In copying my notes into my journal, I came across this paragraph,—

It was the mission of the new faith to promulgate the distinctly feminine virtues in place of the sterner ideals of antiquity—love in place of understanding, sympathy for justice, self-surrender for magnanimity,—and as a consequence the eternal feminine was strangely idealised, giving us in religion the worship of the Virgin Mary, and in art the raptures of chivalry culminating in Dante’s adoration of Beatrice. (*SP* 223)

Stevens and Elsie were married in Reading, Pennsylvania, on September 21, 1909. They honeymooned in Boston, visited Cambridge and Stockbridge, Massachusetts, then went on to Albany, where they journeyed by boat down the Hudson River and back to New York City. They moved to 441 W. 21st Street in Chelsea, a building owned by sculptor Adolph Weinman, and resided there until 1916, when Stevens accepted a position with the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company.

There is no record or indication Wallace Stevens and Sybil Gage ever saw or contacted one another after the summer of 1902. Until his letter to Eberhart in 1950, there is nothing in Stevens' journals, letters, or other writings to indicate any direct reference to Sybil Gage. Since Sybil died in June 1966 and Stevens' *Letters* did not appear until December 1966, it is safe to say Sybil never learned of Stevens' recollection of her after so many years. The poem "To Miss Gage" remained unknown and unpublished in Stevens' lifetime and came to light only with the publication of his notebooks and journals in Holly Stevens' *Souvenirs and Prophecies* in 1977. Yet Stevens and Peckham presumably remained on cordial terms and in contact with one another until the older man's death in 1926, and Peckham would likely have kept track of the Gage family and their various doings, including Sybil's activities, adventures, and travels in later life, beginning with her trip out West to visit her uncle in San Diego.

Sybil's uncle, Russell Carpenter Allen, was the youngest son of Rev. Joseph Allen. He had attended Harvard (like so many generations of Allens before him), and graduated in 1880 as a classmate and acquaintance of Theodore Roosevelt. After Harvard, he had gone on to Columbia Law School (as had Roosevelt), but had withdrawn after one year, having lost his vision in one eye. Thereafter, in partnership with Joseph Weddle, he traveled to the western United States, eventually locating property outside of San Diego, where he began a citrus-growing venture that became the Sweetwater Fruit Company. At one time, Allen had 15,000 lemon trees under cultivation. Allen became prosperous and was often visited by his father, who kept him informed of Charles Gage's continuing mental problems and the family's hopes for his eventual recovery.

When Sybil first visited her uncle in the early years of the twentieth century, she met Henry (Harry) Weddle, the son of her uncle's business partner. It is not known how long Sybil was in California initially. If she returned to Cambridge to attend college, it might have been at Simmons College or Boston College, both of which had social work programs. She appears to have worked briefly at the Massachusetts Industrial School for Girls. This might have been part of an internship.¹⁰ She would have been in Cambridge at the time of her mother's failing health (Lucy Gage died in December 1907). Sybil would have also visited her father in New Hampshire. Although Gage's mental condition was not as severe as his mother's had been, he was subject to attacks of irrationality and physical lassitude that prevented him from working or functioning in social situations. Sometime after her mother's death, Sybil returned to California to reside with her uncle Russell Allen.

The Weddles and the Allens were two of the most prominent families in the Sweetwater River Valley, and the union of the two might have seemed a natural development. Joseph Weddle's son, Henry (Harry) Weddle (1872–

1963), and Sybil were married in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on October 31, 1909. After their marriage, the couple did not appear to spend a great deal of time together. Sybil remained close to her uncle Russell Allen and his family and urged Allen's wife, Ella, to become active in San Diego civic affairs, including the cleaning-up of prostitution, especially the red-light area known as the Stingaree.¹¹ Both Sybil and Ella were also active in the suffrage movement in San Diego. (California gave women the right to vote in 1913.)

In 1908, Harry Weddle was appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt as Immigration Inspector for Southern California. This was a law enforcement position that involved considerable travel. His territory ranged east to Yuma, Arizona, and as far north as Los Angeles, and his memories and newspaper accounts show much of his time spent in pursuing bandits, smugglers, and illegal immigrants.¹² Although Harry Weddle was born in Newburgh, New York, he grew up in old California and was very much a man of the West. He carried a gun, was a skilled horseman, and was fond of racing. In his 1959 memoirs, he recalled his exploits as a law enforcement officer. He had met Wyatt Earp at a horse race on the San Diego border in 1909 and thereafter maintained a friendship. He spoke little of his marriage to Sybil, devoting less attention to her than to Wyatt Earp and his law enforcement adventures. Sybil, left alone much of the time, raised their son, Henry (Harry) Headly Weddle, Jr. (1913–1977), and devoted herself to civic affairs.

In 1926, Russell Allen died, and the Sweetwater Fruit Company passed into other hands. At about this time, Sybil, Harry, and her son, Headly, moved to La Jolla, California, an affluent suburb of San Diego. In the late 1950s, Sybil began attending Friends meetings at the La Jolla Quakers. It was at this time that she became acquainted with the young Lowell Tozer, through their mutual interest in poetry and literature (Tozer specialized in Emerson, Thoreau, and the mid-nineteenth century period).

Sybil's husband, Harry Weddle, died in 1963 at the age of 92, and, as mentioned, Sybil died in La Jolla on June 15, 1966. She is buried in El Cajon Cemetery, alongside her husband. Her only child, Headly, a civil engineer, married Nancy Skinker Howat, a widow with four children. Sybil had no grandchildren. Her son and his wife are also buried in El Cajon Cemetery.

WALLACE STEVENS AND THE ARENSBERG CIRCLE

After his marriage to Elsie in September 1909, Stevens wrote no more poetry until the summer of 1913. Stevens' renewed interest in poetry coincided with the modernist movement in American poetry, which was influenced by the European avant-garde movement and spread outward from New York City. Stevens lived in New York during this period and frequently socialized with a group of poets and artists who embraced modernism. He regularly attended "salons" held by Walter Conrad Arensberg, a friend from his Harvard days and with whom Stevens maintained a

relationship after his marriage to Elsie. Many of the members of the Arensberg circle were former Harvard classmates of Stevens' and Arensberg's and had contributed to the *Harvard Advocate*.

Many scholars, such as Glen MacLeod, Robert Buttel, and Joan Richardson, have shown that Arensberg, with his interest in modern art, cryptography, and Dante, was an influence on Stevens' early poetic development. Stevens admired and respected Arensberg and maintained a close relationship with him until 1921, when they had a falling-out (described by Stevens in his 1954 letter to Weldon Kees [L 822]). By mid-1914, when Arensberg's first book of poetry, *Poems*, appeared, Stevens was working closely with the Arensberg group and with Arensberg himself. MacLeod notes that Stevens "respected Arensberg's poetic abilities enough to solicit his criticism [of "Sonatina to Hans Christian"], and to adopt a number of his suggestions for revision" (47–48). But more important, perhaps, was Arensberg's interest in Dante, which led not only to Arensberg's own translations of the *Divine Comedy* in terza rima, but also to the publication of *The Cryptography of Dante*, in 1921 (MacLeod 48–49). One notes easily the influence of Dante on Stevens' characteristic three-line stanza and his observation that "the great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of the earth remains to be written" (730). Dante's *Divine Comedy*, as well as Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, had become sacred texts for the Arensberg circle, and, as noted by Richardson, its members were composing poems with ciphers, secret messages, word-play, and similar puzzles.¹³

Carl Van Vechten recalls that just after Thanksgiving 1914, Stevens read "Dolls" (unpublished, but retained) and "Cy Est Pourtraicte, Madame Ste Ursule, et Les Unze Mille Vierges" at a gathering at the Arensbergs (49). Shortly thereafter, Stevens composed his two early masterpieces, "Peter Quince at the Clavier" and "Sunday Morning." This transformation is astonishing and puzzling. Anatole Broyard, reviewing *Souvenirs and Prophecies*, observes:

"I cannot explain the great leap from juvenile verses to 'Sunday [Morning],'" writes his daughter, Holly Stevens, "but we have seen many intimations of its coming." I disagree. There are no intimations whatever of Stevens's ultimate achievement: One year he was writing vapid and sentimental mediocrities, and the next he was turning out one of the best poems of our century. There is no change that we learn of, no crucial event that might have clarified him. All we know is that, at the relatively ripe age of 35, he was mysteriously transmogrified from an empty and conventional poet into a master so original as to be considered eccentric by some critics. (48)

Broyard's review of Holly Stevens' edition of her father's journals and juvenilia is harsh and unfortunate. One of Stevens' great admirers, he died in 1990, never learning the story behind Stevens' seemingly miraculous emergence: the "secret" of Wallace Stevens' genius.

Poets write for secret lovers. Dante had his Beatrice (as Stevens had noted in 1908); Petrarch, his Laura (L'Aura); Thomas Wyatt composed poems to his cousin Anne Boleyn, concealing her name (my "answer"); Shakespeare, his undiscovered "dark lady"—even staid Victorian Matthew Arnold's best poems are written to Marguerite, never identified, but apparently an early love—or encounter—from his youthful travels in the Alps. Stevens, steeped in the Arensberg Circle's reverence of Dante, had failed to find his muse in his young wife, Elsie. He had already written a poem in praise of a beautiful, unattainable woman ("To Miss Gage"). If Stevens wanted a muse—beautiful, secret, and utterly unattainable—Sybil Gage, now married and living among the lemon groves of California, was going to be perfect for the role.

"DOLLS"

During 1913 and early 1914, Stevens had been reworking some of the "June Book" poems and was also experimenting with Dantean terza rima in several poems, including "Dolls." Many of the Dante experiments are only tentative fragments, but "Dolls," though not published in Stevens' lifetime, might have been the first complete poem inspired by Stevens' new muse. Although Stevens did not publish "Dolls," he preserved it in manuscript, and it eventually appeared in Buttell's *The Making of Harmonium*. In "Dolls," Stevens encapsulates *The Divine Comedy* in three tercets (with a bit of Milton for good measure):

The thought of Eve, within me, is a doll
That does what I desire, as, to perplex,
With apple-buds, the husband in her sire.

There's a pious caliph, now, who prays and sees
A vermeil cheek. He is half-conscious of
The quaint seduction of a scented veil.

Playing with dolls? A solid game, greybeards.
Think of the cherubim and seraphim,
And of Another, whom I must not name. (517)

The first tercet immediately establishes this as a wordplay poem. "Eve" may refer to the feminine, creative impulse within the poet. But the phrase "Eve, within me" plays on Stevens' own name and suggests that this poem might contain further hidden meanings or messages.¹⁴

The third tercet of “Dolls,” with its line, “Think of the cherubim and seraphim,” puts us in the Paradise of Dante, where he is united with Beatrice. It is this third tercet that is of particular interest. The final line, “And of Another, whom I cannot name,” is the most mysterious. The obvious reading is that “Another, whom I cannot name” is God, who plays with His human creatures as though they were dolls and Whose name, especially in this blasphemous context, must not be articulated. But there could also be an embedded code, one that suggests Stevens has found his muse and though, in Dantean tradition, he cannot name her directly, he can in fact reveal her identity.

If there is a hidden cipher, it is likely to be in the opening line of the final tercet: “Playing with dolls? A solid game, greybeards.” Here Stevens is making reference to Arensberg’s obsession with wordplay and cryptography. The conjunction of “dolls” and “solid” may point up that a cipher is intended, with the word “dolls,” a repetition of the title, acting as a cryptographic stop (cipher begins here). The source of the cipher, which we are about to examine, appears to be taken from Sigmund Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*. In the 1913/1915 Brill translation of this work, Freud invents the word “*Autodidasker*” to describe the automatic ciphering that takes place in dream wordplay:

[T]his playing with names and syllables in which I am here engaged contains still another meaning. The wish that my brother may have a happy family life is represented by it in the following manner. In the artistic romance *L’Oeuvre*, the writer, as is well known, has incidentally given an episodic account of himself and of his own family happiness, and he appears under the name of *Sandoz*. Probably he has taken the following course in the name transformation. *Zola* when inverted (as children like so much to do) gives *Aloz*. But that was still too undisguised for him; therefore he replaced the syllable *Al*, which stands at the beginning of the name Alexander, by the third syllable of the same name, *sand*, and thus *Sandoz* came about. In a similar manner my *autodidasker* originated. (284)

The word “solid” becomes “idols” by moving the initial “s” to the end and rearranging the remaining “syllables” or letter groups. This is the sort of semi-anagrammatic, anonymic wordplay that Stevens employs elsewhere (as we shall see).

Armed with Freud’s “key” and reading partially backward, we discern:

a soLIId game, greYBeardS	[Sybil]
a solid GAme, GrEybeards	[Gage]
a solid gaME, gReybEARDs	[Dreamer]

This is not a particularly elegant construction—there are some leftover letters at the start, and “greybeard” has to be spelled English-style (Stevens unfailingly spells it “gray” in sixteen other instances). But this cipher is no accident, either. Stevens has clearly (well, not clearly) identified Sybil Gage as his newfound muse (“Another, whom I must not name”).

If Stevens was experimenting with wordplay and hidden text, this appears to be one of his earliest attempts. There are undoubtedly more examples of this sort of wordplay and cipher. For example, in “Anecdote of the Jar,” Stevens does something similar. He had previously read Dante’s *A New Life*, where the poet speaks of his initial meeting with the nine-year-old Beatrice Portinari, including the Latin phrase “ecce deus fortior me, qui beniens dominabitur mihi” [the god of love, greater than I, came and took dominion over me]. This was Dante’s first meeting with his muse. In “Anecdote of the Jar,” a poem composed in 1919, when Stevens was still part of the Arensberg group, Stevens writes:

The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.
It took dominion everywhere. (61)

This wordplay on the name Port-in-ari seems obvious (once you see it), but commentators have puzzled over “port in air” since the poem was published (e.g., “No longer ‘of a port in air’ [port wine? portent?]” [Costello 63]). Many other examples of such wordplay are still to be discovered in the *Harmonium* poems.

THE COMEDIAN AS THE LETTER C

“The Comedian as the Letter C” is the longest poem in *Harmonium*, occupying some 523 lines and twenty pages. It is a lengthy narrative of the journey of Crispin from the old world to Central America, and thence, by way of Havana, to the Carolinas. Every major Stevens critic, and not a few others, have attempted to come to grips with this poem, largely without success. Helen Vendler comments on Stevens’ conscious manipulation of language in “The Comedian as the Letter C”: “[This poem] is fantastic in its language, and belongs, in the spectrum of poetic effort, at the end where we find anagrams, schemes, acrostics, figure poems, double sestinas, and so on—the poetry of ingenuity, the poetry with overt verbal designs on its readers” (39). Stevens himself admits to deliberate obscurity during this period. Writing to Harriet Monroe on October 28, 1922, he notes: “Only, the reading of these outmoded and debilitated poems does make me wish rather desperately to keep on dabbling and to be as obscure as possible until I have perfected an authentic and fluent speech for myself” (L 231). An additional difficulty with “The Comedian” has been in the identity of the speaker and the genesis of the persona of Crispin. Vendler observes:

Although the *Comedian* is written in the third person, there is no consistent speaking voice. Some readers have seen the speaker as an older Crispin ironically retelling his past voyage, but the narrator can be placed equally well at a further remove, as a third voice which modulates into both the voices of Crispin, high and low. Crispin in fact is dead, and the third voice claims no temporal continuity with him at all, however much it may be true that all three are Stevens. (41)

In "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," Stevens writes, "The poem is the cry of its occasion" (404). It is difficult to determine the "occasion" of any poem without direct reference in a poet's letters or other writings, especially one as deliberately obscure as "The Comedian as the Letter C." However, working with the hypothesis that Sybil Gage is the muse of *Harmonium*, and that she is therefore involved in the occasion of the composition of "The Comedian," we can illuminate some of the obscurities of the poem.

Wallace Stevens and Charles Gage have backgrounds that are remarkably similar. Both attended Harvard, edited the *Advocate*, received legal training, practiced law in New York City, wrote and published poetry. Later in life their paths diverged: Stevens became a successful poet while Gage ceased writing poetry (although his writings continued to appear—the *Harvard Advocate* for 1900, when Stevens was editor, published two of Gage's poems). Sybil's father became incapacitated ("nincompated") by mental illness in 1883. Although Stevens did not suffer the same fate, there is a parallel in his life: In 1901, Stevens' father, Garrett Stevens, had a mental breakdown from which he never fully recovered (see *L* 454). (Garrett Stevens had been a teacher prior to becoming a lawyer, and the "nincompated pedagogue" [22] of "The Comedian as the Letter C" is equally descriptive of both men.)

Sybil's father, Charles Sibley Gage, died on September 6, 1920. A lengthy obituary appeared in the December 1920 issue of the *Harvard Graduate Magazine*, where Stevens would almost certainly have seen it. The obituary described Gage's literary and business accomplishments as well as the decline of his mental health and listed Gage's surviving children, including Sybil:

Charles Sibley Gage was born at Concord, N. H., Dec. 30, 1843, the son of Charles Pinckney Gage, a prominent physician of Concord, and Nancy Sibley. He was fitted for College at Phillips Exeter Academy, and entered Harvard College with the Class of 1867, in the summer of 1863. He and Clement K. Fay and Samuel Hoar were all men of wit and humor and greatly attracted the interest of their classmates. During the first two years of his course, he paid less attention to his studies than to

other things, and at the beginning of the junior year was “rusticated,” as the system then was, and sent for six months to be under the charge of the Rev. Joseph Allen, a Unitarian minister then settled in Northboro, and for that period was a member of Mr. Allen’s family. Returning to Harvard in the beginning of the second term in the early spring of 1866, he joined with his classmate Peckham in starting a college paper, the *Collegian*. Gage had considerable literary talent. He was chosen as toastmaster for the Class supper that was held in the Sophomore year on Nov. 22, 1864, and at the Class election in January 1867, he was chosen Class poet.

He did not attain any special rank in College, but the non-attainment of high rank is not necessarily a criterion of a man’s ability. After graduation he studied law, and engaged in the insurance business in his native city, Concord, N. H. He went to New York and was admitted to the bar there in November 1869, and entered upon the practice of law, having an office at 5 Beekman St. He was engaged also in editing the *Internal Revenue Record and Customs Journal* at 59 Park Row, New York. On Oct. 2, 1872, he married Lucy Clark Allen, of Cambridge, the elder daughter of the Rev. Joseph Allen, who had previously moved with his family to Cambridge. There were five children of this marriage, a son, Charles Pinckney, born Aug. 13, 1873, who died in early childhood, Dec. 23, 1875; and four daughters—Margaret Weld, born April 4, 1876, A. B. Radcliffe, 1901; Anna Minot, born Aug. 23, 1879; Sybil, who was first named Lucy Hancock, born Oct. 21, 1880, who married Henry Headley Weddle, Oct. 30, 1909, and has one child, Henry Headley Weddle, Jr., born May 19, 1913; and Miriam, born Dec. 15, 1884. Resuming the account of his career, I quote from the 4th Class Report, 1873. He writes, under date of New York, Feb. 20, 1873: “I have been, since the date of your last report, and am now, practicing law at 5 Beekman Street, in this city. In April, 1872, I went to Antigua, British West Indies, by the way of Cuba, St. Thomas, and Guadaloupe, on behalf of underwriters in this city . . . returning in June by way of St. Thomas, Bermudas, and Halifax. During the last half of 1872, I was employed a portion of my time each day, upon the work of revising the American Encyclopedia, now going on. As a citizen, I have, in common with all the resident graduates of Harvard, aided as I could the movement towards municipal reform.” The four following reports show that he continued in the practice of law in New York until some date in the year 1883, being at one time a member of the firm of Gage & Worcester, and at one time during that period secretary and attorney of the Metropolitan Tele-

phone & Telegraph Co. in New York. In the year 1883 he gave up the practice of law and left New York, owing to having become partly of unsound mind, and went to Concord, N. H., and there became an inmate of the New Hampshire State Hospital "under treatment for his failing health," as expressed in a Class Report. It was, however, a failure, not in physical, but in mental health. There he passed the rest of his life. He was not confined to the hospital, but was allowed considerable freedom, often going out with an attendant, and going occasionally for a stay at the farm in Hopkinton, N. H., which had belonged to his grandfather and still remained in the possession of the family, and sometimes going fishing, a sport that he had enjoyed in his youth. I quote again from the 9th Class Report: "He often speaks of his classmates, sometimes as if he had seen them lately, always with very happy recollections of his life among them." His wife died Dec. 19, 1907. He died at Concord, Sept. 6, 1920, survived by his four daughters and grandson. (*Harvard Graduate* 274)

Both Stevens and Sybil were interested in their respective family genealogies, and both supposed they were descendants of illustrious forebears. The wishful tendency to replace one's family members with others of better birth was observed and discussed by Freud, who termed it "family romance," and it has been described by Freudian Robert Seidenberg as the "dream of exalted parentage." (In "The Comedian," Stevens is content to refer to "oncoming fantasies of better birth" [32].) In short, it seems likely that in "The Comedian as the Letter C," Stevens used the material in Gage's obituary, along with Sybil's imaginative recollections of her "exalted" family history and elements of Stevens' own background, to produce the figure of Crispin, who starts out as a composite of ancestral Stevenses and Gages. Stevens concludes the poem with a direct comparison between himself and Sybil's father.

In the first two sections of "The Comedian"—"The World Without Imagination" and "Concerning the Thunderstorms of Yucatan"—Crispin travels from Bordeaux through Yucatan, stopping at Havana, and finally ending in Carolina. Place names were important to Stevens, and an examination of Crispin's voyage reveals connections with both his own ancestry and that of the Gages. The voyage to the New World begins from Bordeaux. Why Bordeaux? Possibly because Stevens' interest in genealogy had convinced him that he was descended from Admiral Coligny. During the Huguenot persecutions, Bordeaux was a favorite port of embarkation for Huguenots resettling in the New World, just as New Bordeaux, in South Carolina, was a favored destination (Van Ruyambeke 278).

Crispin's first port of call is Mayan Yucatan. Again, why the Mayans, why Yucatan? Is this perhaps because one of Sybil's fantasized ancestors,

Thomas Gage, was one of the earliest and most famous explorers of this region? Stevens most likely did not use Gage's book for his descriptions of Yucatan, although he may have had access to it. In 1981, Rajeev Patke published "Stevens and Stephens: A Possible Source," identifying the descriptions of Yucatan as being taken from John Lloyd Stephens' travel book, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*. The area explored by Stephens almost exactly coincides with a portion of Thomas Gage's earlier travels in Central America. Thomas Gage had also stopped in Havana, returning to England in 1637.

Stevens depends heavily on Stephens' book, including the use of Spanish words, such as *sierra*, *balustrade*, *cabildo*, and *pronunciamento*. Stevens makes more extensive use of this source than any previously known connection warrants, and it is possible that Sybil might have informed Stevens that her father had read this book in preparation for his own Caribbean journey in 1872. Although nothing indicates that Charles Gage visited Central America, his obituary does mention stopping in Cuba, presumably Havana. Stephens' book was immensely popular during the 1840s and thereafter. Stevens owned Stephens' book, but this title was sold at auction, its present whereabouts unknown (Edelstein 64).

In sections III and IV of "The Comedian"—"Approaching Carolina" and "The Idea of a Colony"—the parallels are more tenuous. Charles Gage had no connection that we know of either with South Carolina or the founding of a literary or other colony, although Gage's father, Charles Pinckney Gage (1811–1894), was named after Colonial South Carolina politician Charles Pinckney, a signer of the Constitution. As previously noted, Stevens might have believed himself to be descended from Admiral Coligny, and the material in section III, "Approaching Carolina," appears to be taken largely from Walter Besant's biography of Admiral Coligny, *Gaspard de Coligny, Marquis de Chatillon*—which Stevens owned (Bates 50)—in which Besant discusses the various attempts at establishing Huguenot colonies in the New World.

Besant states: "It must be remembered that France, never at any time a colonizing nation, was, in the sixteenth century, like all other countries, entirely ignorant of *the idea of a colony*" (58–59; emphasis added). The French first tried colonizing Brazil, without success, then Florida, and lastly Charles Fort on what is now Parris Island, South Carolina. None of these colonies had sufficient women or knowledge of agriculture to survive, and the Spanish colonists in Florida were implacably hostile to the French. In 1764, the town of New Bordeaux, the last of seven French Huguenot colonies, was established (Van Ruyambeke 223). But even this newly discovered source material does not fully or satisfactorily explain Stevens' insistence on Crispin's involvement in a South Carolina literary colony. Section V ("A Nice Shady Home") is Stevens at his most autobiographical, and it contains some of his strongest writing.

These later sections also reflect a divergence of Stevens and Charles Gage in their later lives. Crispin dies, just as Gage does. In his 1950 letter to Richard Eberhart, Stevens mentions Sybil Gage's father as being dead at the time of his meeting Sybil in 1902. However, this was not true, as Stevens knew very well. The importance of Gage's death in 1920, and thus the likelihood of its being the "occasion" of "The Comedian as the Letter C," is suggested by the prominence of Crispin's death in an earlier version of the poem, entitled "From the Journal of Crispin," which ends with the line, "Thereafter he may stalk in other spheres":

Trinket pasticcio, floating skyey sheets,
With Crispin as the tiptoe cozener?
No, no: veracious page on page, exact.
As Crispin in his attic shapes the book
That will contain him, he requires this end:
The book shall discourse of himself alone,
Of what he was, and why, and of his place,
And of its fitted pomp and parentage.
Thereafter he may stalk in other spheres. (995)

The final section of "The Comedian," "And Daughters with Curls," is a description of Charles Gage's life and obituary. In the concluding section of his book, *The Long Poems of Wallace Stevens*, Patke notes previous discussions of the "four daughter problem," remarking, "The roles of wife and daughter in their allegorical design are left open to speculation" (29–30). Crispin's four daughters are, in fact, the daughters of Charles Gage:

Four daughters in a world too intricate
In the beginning, four blithe instruments
Of differing struts, four voices several
In couch, four more personae, intimate
As buffo, yet divers, four mirrors blue
That should be silver, four accustomed seeds
Hinting incredible hues, four self-same lights
That spread chromatics in hilarious dark,
Four questioners and four sure answerers. (36)

Although they are unnamed and only barely differentiated, it is significant that the third daughter is somewhat more fully described: "The third one gaping at the orioles / Lettered herself demurely as became / A pearly poetess, peaked for rhapsody" (36). The section concludes:

Or if the music sticks, if the anecdote
Is false, if Crispin is a profitless
Philosopher, beginning with green brag,

Concluding fadedly, if as a man
 Prone to distemper he abates in taste,
 Fickle and fumbling, variable, obscure,
 Glozing his life with after-shining flicks,
 Illuminating, from a fancy gorged
 By apparition, plain and common things,
 Sequestering the fluster from the year,
 Making gulped potions from obstreperous drops,
 And so distorting, proving what he proves
 Is nothing, what can all this matter since
 The relation comes, benignly, to its end?
 So may the relation of each man be clipped. (37)

Stevens utilized material from Gage's obituary in the two final sections of "The Comedian as the Letter C," providing a tribute of sorts to "the founder of Sybil," while at the same time allowing Stevens to announce that he had grown from the struggling, impoverished young lawyer of 1902 into the man that Sybil's father had aspired to be, achieving prominence both in business and as a poet.

TO THE ONE OF FICTIVE MUSIC

"To the One of Fictive Music" appeared in the November 15, 1922, issue of *The New Republic*. As Stevens had spent the summer of 1922 revising "The Comedian as the Letter C," it is likely that this poem was composed shortly thereafter, in the late summer or early fall, and is the last composed of the *Harmonium* poems (Stevens had the *Harmonium* manuscript completed by November 18, 1922 (L 232). There is magnificent language in Stevens' poem ("feigning with the strange unlike" [71]), but there is a perplexing passage:

For so retentive of themselves are men
 That music is intensest which proclaims
 The near, the clear, and vaunts the clearest bloom,
 And of all vigils musing the obscure,
 That apprehends the most which sees and names,
 As in your name, an image that is sure,
 Among the arrant spices of the sun,
 O bough and bush and scented vine, in whom
 We give ourselves our likest issuance. (71)

"As in your name, an image that is sure"—but in whose name? Is the muse's name concealed, as in "Dolls"? If so, I have not been able to discover it. The previous stanza reads:

Now, of the music summoned by the birth
 That separates us from the wind and sea,

Yet leaves us in them, until earth becomes,
By being so much of the things we are,
Gross effigy and simulacrum, none
Gives motion to perfection more serene
Than yours, out of our imperfections wrought,
Most rare, or ever more kindred air
In the laborious weaving that you wear. (70–71)

A working typescript of this poem had been salvaged from a trash can (along with a manuscript of "From the Journal of Crispin") by Stevens' landlord, when Stevens was living at 735 Farmington Avenue in Hartford. These manuscripts were donated to the Yale library in 1974, and the earlier version of "To the One of Fictive Music" appeared in the 1979 article "Manuscripts of Wallace Stevens," by Louis L. Martz. A typescript of the early version entitled "To the Fictive Virgin" indicates that Stevens had tried out several titles, including "Souvenir de la Muse De la Belle Terre"; "De la Terre Belle et Simple"; "Souvenir of the Muse of Earlier, Simpler Earth"; "Souvenir of the Muse of Archaic Earth"; "Souvenir of the Archaic Muse"; "Souvenir of A Muse"; and "Of Fictive Music." In the second stanza of the manuscript, we find:

Now, of the music summoned by the change
That separates us from our elements
Yet leaves us in them, until earth becomes,
By being so much of the things we are,
The vigil of a shadowy sibyl, none
Gives motion to perfection more serene
Than yours, out of our imperfections wrought,
Most rare, or ever of more kindred air
In the laborious weaving that you wear. (Martz 53)

The line, "The vigil of a shadowy sibyl, none," has been crossed out, and next to it written, "The shadow of a self-like second, none." This was finally replaced by the line, "Gross effigy and simulacrum, none." The characterization of Sybil (or a sibyl) as second self reappears in "The Sail of Ulysses" and might have its origin in Francis Bacon's essay "On Friendship," in his phrase, "A friend is another himself," echoing Cicero's earlier essay on friendship: "A friend is a second self." Stevens wrote in his journal of Sunday, August 17, 1902:

Reached Boonton, my destination, shortly after eight, where I secured lodgings at the Mansion House, grubbed, strolled to a public reading-room and read Bacon's essay "On Friendship," returned to the hotel and turned in. (*SP* 105)

In correspondence with Ronald Lane Latimer regarding "To the One of Fictive Music," Stevens wrote:

The music of poetry which creates its own fictions is one of the "sisterhood of the living dead." It is a muse: all of the muses are of that sisterhood. But then I cannot say, at this distance of time, that I specifically meant the muses; this is just an explanation. I don't think that I meant anything definitely except all the things that live in memory and imagination. (L 297)

The following day, Stevens wrote again:

The purpose of writing to you this morning is that, as I copied [the poem] last night, I felt that the figures in the sisterhood had never been any clearer in my mind than they are in the poem. To explain is to translate, and the translation contained in yesterday's letter was rather loathsome. *No muses exist for me*. The One of Fictive Music is one of the sisterhood; who the others are I don't know, except to say that they are figures of that sort. I felt as though I should have to say this to you in order to enjoy Thanksgiving properly. (L 298; emphasis added)

Harmonium was published on September 7, 1923. Shortly thereafter, Stevens and Elsie took a cruise through the Panama Canal, stopping in San Diego, Los Angeles (November 10, 1923), and San Francisco. Stevens' only child, Holly, was conceived during this voyage. Holly later recalled that her father had wanted to name her Sybil, but that Elsie objected to the assonant sound ("Holidays in Reality" 106). She evidently knew nothing of the real Sybil. Stevens' choice of name recalls that Dante's only daughter (Antonia) had become a nun, taking the name Sister Beatrice.

Stevens composed two more poems the following month. The first, "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," appeared in *The Dial* in July 1924 and celebrated the voyage and the conception of his daughter. Yet almost immediately thereafter, he published "Red Loves Kit" in *The Measure* (August 1924). By now, apparently, Elsie was protesting that the *Harmonium* poems were addressed to someone other than her: "Her words accuse you of adulteries / That sack the sun, though metaphysical" (556). Some time thereafter, Stevens penned, in his "Adagia": "The full flower of the actual, not the California fruit of the ideal" (910).

CONCLUSION

After the publication of "Red Loves Kit" and the birth of his daughter, Holly, on August 6, 1924, Stevens published no more poetry until 1930. His next major poem, "The Idea of Order at Key West," did not appear until October 1934. Sybil seems to be absent from this poetry, and Stevens

could truthfully maintain to Latimer in his 1935 letter that “no muses exist for me” (L 298). Yet, Sybil had not been entirely put aside. In 1931, a second edition of *Harmonium* appeared. Stevens had removed three poems from the first edition and added eleven poems, including “The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad,” “Sea Surface Full of Clouds,” “New England Verses,” “Sonatina to Hans Christian,” and “Indian River.” “Sea Surface Full of Clouds,” which begins, “In that November off Tehuantepec,” had originally been published in the August 24, 1924, *New Republic*. It is autobiographical in that Stevens, on his 1923 cruise from New York to California, passed the Gulf of Tehuantepec in late October 1923. Tehuantepec is one of the prominent place names in *Thomas Gage’s Travels in the New World*, as noted by Norman Newton:

Tehuantepec was a fishing town: you could meet on the roads long trains of fifty to a hundred mules, their backs piled high with salt fish for Oaxaca, Puebla, and Mexico. It was also a small and prosperous port whose merchants, some of whom were very rich, traded with Peru and other colonies to the south. (80)

We do not know if Sybil Gage had especially mentioned Tehuantepec in connection with her knowledge of *Thomas Gage’s Travels in the New World*, but it is at least possible that Stevens deliberately referenced Tehuantepec, which is repeated five times in the poem, for that purpose. It might be an indication that Sybil Gage would well recognize, if she read the poem.

If this were the only possible reference in these later, included poems, we might be inclined to dismiss it as coincidence or happenstance, but there are a number of others as well. In “New England Verses,” Stevens writes:

Boston with a Note-book

Lean encyclopaedists, inscribe an Iliad.
There’s a weltanschauung of the penny pad. (87)

This couplet recalls that Sybil’s father had been employed for a time from 1873 to 1876 as a reviser of *The American Cyclopaedia*, which had been edited by George Ripley and Charles A. Dana. Charles Gage’s name appears on the title page of each volume of the revisions of *The American Cyclopaedia*; however, the entries themselves are all anonymously done. It is at least possible that Sybil might have referred to specific revisions in her 1902 conversations with Stevens, and the reference to encyclopaedists strongly suggests that Stevens is talking about Sybil’s father.

The final addition to this second edition of *Harmonium* is a poem called “Indian River.” From the title, one immediately recalls that Indian River is a tributary of the Hudson River, flowing out of Indian Lake. However,

what is described here is not the Adirondack river, but a slough in Indian River County, Florida, just north of Vero Beach. Joan Richardson describes Indian River as follows:

The two remaining poems of the group, "Indian River" and "Sonatina to Hans Christian," were the most openly personal. They integrated specific elements from the poet's past and through them pointed to how very different things were now. The first was drawn from Stevens's memory of the long sailing trip he made shortly after Holly's birth. Indian River was one of the places on the itinerary he had noted in his letter to Harriet Monroe. (*The Later Years* 68)

Richardson is mistaken about any reference to Indian River. Stevens had written to Harriet Monroe on February 3, 1926: "I have just returned from a trip of several weeks on John Little's [Lake?]. We went from Miami to Key West, up the Gulf to Indian Key, and to Everglades on the West Coast (including the Ten Thousand Islands, which are inaccessible except on a yacht), then by way of Cape Sable to Long Key and back to Miami" (*L* 247). Indian Key is on the Gulf side of Florida, north of Tampa. Indian River is on the Atlantic. Given what we know now about Stevens' earlier associations with the Adirondack Indian Lake and Indian River, one is tempted to conclude that Stevens included a brief poem with the title "Indian River" for the purpose of recalling an earlier Indian River in the summer of 1902.

The identification of Sybil Gage as inspiration for the *Harmonium* poems should cause Stevens' early work to be reexamined. Sybil's connection with the later poetry is less prominent, but never disappears entirely (see Appendix). The discovery that Sybil Gage might have been Stevens' early muse in no way lessens or compromises the beauty of the work he wrote under her influence. Nor does it fully explain his sudden maturation as a poet. However, "this angel" might well have played a decisive role in the miraculous transformation described by Anatole Broyard. To modify Broyard's observation just a bit, "One year he was writing vapid and sentimental mediocrities, and the next he was turning out . . . the best poems of our century."

Anchorage, Alaska

APPENDIX
POSSIBLE ALLUSIONS TO SYBIL GAGE IN THE LATER POETRY

1. In "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War" (April 1942), the first section concludes with the word "sybils" (note the spelling):

The brightness
Of arms, the will opposed to cold, fate
In its cavern, wings subtler than any mercy,
These were the psalter of their sybils. (244)

2. In "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" (1949), we find references to lemon trees:

In the land of the lemon trees, yellow and yellow were
Yellow-blue, yellow-green, pungent with citron-sap. . . . (415)

3. "Things of August," published in *Poetry* in December 1949, seems to be a reminiscence of an earlier time and contains Stevens' only mention of the word "Adirondack."

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. (417-18)

4. "Angel Surrounded by Paysans" contains a reference to a muse or guiding spirit—an "angel," as Stevens would describe Sybil in his December 1950 letter to Eberhart.

5. In his May 31, 1954 Phi Beta Kappa address to Columbia University, Stevens was asked to compose a poem that would have to do with one aspect of the birthday theme. Here, in a poem that he did not believe would be published, he made his clearest statement, as Holly Stevens had much earlier noted. Section 8 begins:

What is the shape of the sibyl? Not,
For a change, the englistered woman, seated
In colorings harmonious, dewed and dashed
By them: gorgeous symbol seated
On the seat of halidom, rainbowed,
Piercing the spirit by appearance,
A summing up of the loftiest lives
And their directing sceptre, the crown
And final effulgence and delving show.
It is the sibyl of the self,
The self as sibyl, whose diamond,
Whose chiefest embracing of all wealth
Is poverty, whose jewel found
At the exactest central of the earth

Is need. For this, the sibyl's shape
Is a blind thing fumbling for its form,
A form that is lame, a hand, a back,
A dream too poor, too destitute
To be remembered, the old shape
Worn and leaning to nothingness,
A woman looking down the road,
A child asleep in its own life. (466)

Notes

William T. Ford died on December 14, 2007. A librarian and then a lawyer by profession, he was the founding editor of the *Wallace Stevens Newsletter* (1969–1971) and, along with Robert H. Deutsch, he founded the Wallace Stevens Society (1976) and *The Wallace Stevens Journal* (1977). Ford had a lifelong passion for the poetry of Wallace Stevens, believing him to be superior to any other twentieth-century American poet. He served on the editorial board as an expert proofreader. He was also a generous supporter of the Wallace Stevens Society.

This essay is the result of nearly ten years of research. A few weeks before he died, Ford sent me the manuscript he had been working on—not quite finished and over sixty pages in length. He asked that I edit it and condense it into an article. I extend my gratitude to members of the editorial board, and especially to Deirdre D. Ford, for their assistance.—*John N. Serio, Editor*

¹ In her edition of her father's letters, Holly Stevens notes: "W. S. Gage and W. G. Peckham were the founders of the *Harvard Advocate*. See Donald Hall, ed.: *The Harvard Advocate Anthology* (New York: Twayne; 1950), pp. 11–33" (L 700 n 2).

² The snapshot has been lost. Lowell Tozer recalled that it showed Stevens as a young man, standing with one foot on a tree stump or fence railing. After Sybil's death, Tozer returned the poem and photograph to family members. The original of the poem "To Miss Gage" is in the possession of John K. Howat, Sybil's step-grandson, of New York City. Sybil's autograph book remains in Tozer's possession. Of it, Tozer writes: "Her autograph book contains notes and poems that show that she knew people of education and culture, such as the poet Jones Very, Nathaniel Hawthorne's son Julian, Jared Sparks, Josiah Quincy, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Charles Dickens, and several others. I also found tucked into the book a snapshot of Wallace Stevens as a handsome and dashing young man. She had kept the picture all those years, she said, as they had been sweethearts."

³ Peckham's summer Adirondack home was recently featured in a photographic essay by Michael Flecky, "Twin Coves, A Classic Woodland Retreat on the Shore of Indian Lake."

⁴ Wallace Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 333. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with page number(s) only in parentheses.

⁵ Mary Allen Ward (daughter of Russell Allen), 1951, speech, transcript included in the collection, *Family, Friends, and Homes* (377).

⁶ This period is not accounted for in either Peckham's or Stevens' Affidavits of Employment (see Richardson, *The Early Years*, photographic illustration following 192). On July 31, 1902, Stevens purchased a set of books, *Poetes de Second Ordre* (Paris, 1818), and wrote, "B't in Albany, 31 July 1902, returning from Peckham's Camp in the Adirondacks" (Bates 52).

⁷ Thomas Gage's book was titled *The English-American, His Travel by Sea and Land, or A New Survey of the West Indies* (1648). The first edition was followed by a second in 1655, a third in 1677, and subsequent editions in 1699, 1702, and 1711. Thereafter,

British interest in Central America dwindled, and over two centuries passed before the book was again printed in England. The book was long out of print in 1902, but was reprinted in 1958 as *Thomas Gage's Travels in the New World*.

⁸ Charles Gage was sufficiently prominent that *The New York Times* reported his illness (getting his name wrong, but his home address correct):

Insane From Overwork

Thomas S. Gage, Secretary of the Metropolitan Telephone Company, residing at number 65 Joralemon-street, Brooklyn, was arrested yesterday at the instance of H. G. Atwater, of No. 145 Broadway, and J. C. Vail, an employe of the Telephone Company. The charge was insanity, caused, it was supposed, by overwork. He labored under a hallucination that he had divulged a secret of the Masonic order and that he was followed up. When arrested he refused to enter a carriage, preferring to walk to the Tombs. He was examined by the prison physician, who was of the opinion that Gage was insane, and he was sent to Bellevue Hospital. (8)

⁹ Sibley states in the January 1, 1846, entry in his journal:

Received a visit from Charles P. Gage, M.D. of Concord, N.H., a native of Hopkinton, N.H. who married Nancy George Sibley, my cousin, daughter of Stephen Sibley . . . & of his wife Sarah, whose maiden name was Brown, both of Hopkinton, N.H. Mrs. Gage now resides at the McLean Asylum in Somerville, where she has been since 18 June 1845. It was not thought advisable for her to see her husband. Insanity prevails in the Brown family. ("John Langdon Sibley's Diary")

¹⁰ An entry in the "Trust Fund of Lyman and Industrial Schools" reads: "1903. Nov. 11. Sybil Gage, salary, \$40.00" (28).

¹¹ "Most of the committee refused to discuss the issues with *San Diego Union* reporters. Mrs. Harry Weddle claimed she did not care to be quoted on the subject, but relented long enough to state: 'I will say, however, that I think the closing of the [Stingaree] is perfectly practical' " (McKanna).

¹² Henry H. Weddle, interview by Edgar F. Hastings, February 25, 1959, transcript, San Diego Historical Society Research Archives, San Diego, Calif., 2-29.

¹³ Richardson describes Stevens' connection with the Arensberg circle this way:

The function of a circle like the one Arensberg put together, following a model Francis Bacon had imaginatively suggested in *The New Atlantis*, was to relate this privileged body of knowledge to particular facts of nature and human experience, of which they became specialized observers, their participation in the circle strengthening and clarifying their skills. Their reading and discussion of the new intellectual and artistic contributions in Alfred Steiglitz's *Camera Work* and of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, for example, were parts of their commitment. Duchamp's application of the idea of the alchemist's "Great Work" in constructing and naming his *Great Glass*, just like Stevens's application in projecting the "Grand Poem," reflected the high seriousness of their endeavor. . . . What was presented was a puzzle. The key had to be found if it was to make sense. At the moment it did, the joke realized, the skill of the maker was appreciated and a bond formed between artist and audience.

This pleased Stevens a great deal, and he learned to think and imagine in these terms. This allowed him to deflect immediate attention away from the painful aspects of his personal life and, at the same time, put these same aspects at the center of an elaborately constructed puzzle. In

this way he could unburden himself, place the unpleasant secrets outside, and do to them whatever he wanted through the symbolic forms of the poems he wrote. In keeping with the idea of the "Great Work," it would be necessary, he projected, for those who would unlock the puzzle—discover the puns and follow their cues—to devote themselves to his whole corpus over a long period of time in the same way as the practitioners of arcane knowledge. (*The Early Years* 464–65)

¹⁴ The title "Dolls" may have been intended as a mock tribute to Walter Conrad Arensberg, who was interested not only in Dante and Freud, but also in attempting to prove through cryptographic readings that Bacon had authored Shakespeare's plays. At the time "Dolls" was written, Arensberg had published his first volume of poems in 1914; his second volume, *Idols*, would appear in 1916. Although there is no poem by this particular name, the title reflects Arensberg's interest in Francis Bacon and ciphers. In his *Novum Organum*, Francis Bacon classified intellectual fallacies of his time under four headings, which he called Idols: Idols of the Tribe, Idols of the Den, Idols of the Marketplace, and Idols of the Theater. Idols are incorporeal concepts, symbols that receive veneration but are without substance. The anagram of "idols," "solid," is also its opposite. This sort of wordplay is part of the dream system described by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud 283–87).

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“Fully Apparent”: The Center in Stevens’ “Credences of Summer”

KAREN HELGESON

I

THIRTY YEARS AFTER the publication of Wallace Stevens’ “Credences of Summer,” Robert J. Bertholf found it “a little startling that the poem has received less critical attention than any of the other long, difficult poems” (208). More startling still is that this truly major work has received even less published attention in the thirty years since Bertholf’s observation. One reason for this comparative neglect, no doubt, is that there has been no consensus among critics—as there has been with, for example, “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” “The Auroras of Autumn,” “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” and “The Rock”—that “Credences of Summer” is, indeed, major. This undervaluation would seem to have much to do, in turn, with the fact that so many of Stevens’ best critics have so seriously misread the poem.

Helen Vendler and Harold Bloom, for example, have offered similar versions of what seems to have become the majority position regarding “Credences of Summer”: that, although the poem begins on a positive note, this optimism is negated by the quite different tone and content of its concluding cantos. For Vendler, the poem “turns on the difficult relation between the moment of satisfaction and ‘the waste sad time stretching before and after’ ” (237). “Its initial impetus of praise and involvement,” she writes,

is maintained through the first three cantos, but from then on the oneness with the here and now diminishes, until by the end of the poem Stevens is at an inhuman distance from his starting point. (234)

Bloom largely agrees, maintaining that, although Stevens begins the poem by making “a present joy the matter of his song, . . . he can’t keep going, and so *Credences* grows more and more dark from its fourth on to its final canto” (244).

Pursuing a rather different and considerably more formidable argument, Joseph Riddel arrives at an equally pessimistic conclusion. Writing after his mid-career conversion to deconstructionism, Riddel argues that it is not that the poem's initial "moment of satisfaction" cannot be sustained, but rather that it is bogus to begin with. "Credences" opens, he writes, by asking us to believe we can "see . . . the world again as if for the first time, directly or without 'evasion' by language" (68), an experience that, were it actually possible, would be roughly equivalent to Vendler's "oneness with the here and now." But, Riddel continues, the poem goes on to show that the very nature of human perception, thought, and discourse renders such connection untenable. Referring to the speaker's advice that we must "Burn" away all that is irrelevant if we are to understand "the very thing,"¹ Riddel contends that "To burn everything away to one's pure sense of it is still to remain within the realm of 'sense,' and as Nietzsche has revealed, the realm of the sensory is always already metaphorical" (70). The products of our senses are metaphorical, he continues, in that they present us not with things but nerve stimuli "'transformed'" (70). Since knowledge of the object world, which Riddel assumes would require "pure or unmediated perception" (69), is impossible, the words we use to name what we perceive and conceive can be no more than figures for the already figurative. "We live" only, he concludes, "in constructions that are 'credences'" (71).

Unfortunately, the poem's few champions have done little either to challenge interpretations such as these or to influence the critical community's assessments of its value. As Bertholf notes, Frank Kermode long ago counted "Credences" among Stevens' "great poems" but "did not stop to explain his accurate judgment" (208); and Bertholf himself supports his high estimate of the poem with a reading that is far from persuasive. (Citing a number of what he considers significant parallels between "Credences" and Christian mythology—canto V's "bristling soldier" is Christ, its queen is Mary, and so on—he arrives at the somewhat underwhelming conclusion that Stevens' "vision of summer injects as much psychic energy into the cycle of the imagination's life as the birth of Christ does in the Christian myth" [225].) In my judgment, the handful of other positive critiques of "Credences" have been, for the most part, similarly forced or thin.

My essay locates the poem's "moment of satisfaction" in the experience of heightened insight and connection exemplified memorably in canto I and identified in canto II as "the centre." I will argue that such experiences—the agent of which is the creative imagination, especially as it is manifested in the writing and reading of poetry—are portrayed in "Credences" as both genuine and, although not indefinitely sustainable, capable of being repeated in new and "larger" versions. Although a thoroughgoing engagement with poststructuralist theory is beyond the scope of this essay, my argument, especially its claim that "Credences" assumes the existence and importance of centers, should be sufficient to show that

the Stevens of "Credences" is no deconstructionist, Riddelian or any other kind. Finally, assuming the success of its primary argument, the essay should provide compelling evidence not only that "Credences of Summer" deserves to be ranked among Stevens' very best poems but also that a number of these, especially "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" and "The Rock," can be understood in no small part as elaborations of issues and resolutions rehearsed in and inherited from "Credences."

II

The word "centre," or "center," appears repeatedly in Stevens' poetry, early and late; the *Online Concordance to Wallace Stevens' Poetry* lists forty-five occurrences (Serio and Foster). As with most of the major terms that recur throughout his work, what Stevens means by "center" changes over time. I will not try to trace that evolution here. My effort will simply be to explain what Stevens means when he uses the term in "Credences" and to show that, contrary to the views of poststructuralist critics such as Riddel and Paul Bové (who insisted that references to centers were "meaningless" for Stevens [187]), the author of "Credences" clearly believes in the viability of centers.

If what Stevens means by certain of his focal terms changes over time, it is also his practice, of course, to employ different words or combinations of words to denote roughly the same referent. What Stevens calls "the centre" in "Credences" appears under a variety of names throughout his poetry, especially his major work: "balances" in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (334), "permanence composed of impermanence" in "An Ordinary Evening" (403), and "bright sight" in "The Rock" (445), for example. By whatever name, all signify some variation of that rare experience of understanding and connection, conceived in nineteenth-century romanticism, all but institutionalized as the "privileged moment" of Walter Pater, and incorporated into the thinking of a multitude of modernists, most famously perhaps as the "epiphany" of James Joyce. In Stevens' work, some of these, the "balances that happen" in "Notes," for example, seem simply to descend unbidden, like grace; but the majority, including those featured in "Credences," come about only after the disciplined acts of will and imagination that Stevens typically associates with the quest.

Crucial as it is to an understanding of "Credences," "the centre" has received surprisingly little attention in the critical literature, perhaps, again, because so many readers consider it a delusory hypothesis that the poem ultimately disavows anyway. Malcolm Woodland, for example—although he does see fit to address the concept (in his recent *Wallace Stevens and the Apocalyptic Mode*)—dismisses it almost immediately: "There are questions, though, as to whether any actual centering takes place in ['Credences']" (129). My essay will expose the fallacy of such assessments, in part by showing that they derive from mistaken premises (such as Woodland's that realization of a center involves not a fulfillment but a "disciplining of

desire" [114], the implication being that the desiring subject recognizes its inability to satisfactorily connect with the object of its desires, trims its expectations, and settles for a " 'lesser' " [114] sort of satisfaction).

The center, in "Credences" as in other of Stevens' mature poems where the concept goes by different names, is both a state and an experience, both cognitive and affective. Considered as an emotion, it combines an intense thrill in discovery with what could be called a peace that passes understanding, were it not that, in Stevens' typical formulation, peace is *synonymous* with understanding (as in "Notes," for example, where "For a moment in the central of our being, / The vivid transparency that you bring is peace" [329]). Thus, although the exigencies of analysis might require us to do so, it is an oversimplification to speak of a centering's affective and cognitive aspects as if they were separate phenomena. With this caveat in mind, let me suggest that "Credences" conceives of the centering experience primarily as a more or less prolonged instance of heightened insight and that, as "insight" suggests, the poem's characteristic way of rendering this experience is in terms of the acts of seeing or viewing:

Postpone the anatomy of summer, as
The physical pine, the metaphysical pine.
Let's see the very thing and nothing else.
Let's see it with the hottest fire of sight.
Burn everything not part of it to ash.

Trace the gold sun about the whitened sky
Without evasion by a single metaphor.
Look at it in its essential barrenness
And say this, this is the centre that I seek. (322-23)

By advising us to avoid anatomies, whose distinctive feature is that they separate things into parts, the speaker implies that the object of our intense seeking and seeing must be the whole "it." The immediate reference of "it" here ("Let's see it with the hottest fire of sight") is "the very thing," which refers in turn to the second line's pine tree. As is so often the case with Stevens, however, the syntax of this passage is designedly ambiguous; "it" might also refer to "summer." Regardless of what is signified by "the very thing," the next incarnation of "it" is clearly "the centre": "Look at it in its essential barrenness / And say this, this is the centre that I seek." The point of Stevens' ambiguity seems to be that it ultimately makes little difference whether we read "the very thing" as a reference to the pine tree or the season. To truly understand any individual thing is to understand and thus experience connection with the rich whole of which that thing, and oneself, are parts. In "Credences" such centerings necessarily entail a sense of personal fulfillment as well, and with it the joy and peace savored in canto II. To realize the center is to enjoy one's own and

the world's "summer," to become, as it is put near the end of the poem, "Completed in a completed scene" (326).

Remarkable as it is, this sort of centering can be improved upon if we

Fix it in an eternal foliage

And fill the foliage with arrested peace,
Joy of such permanence, right ignorance
Of change still possible. (323)

As many readers have observed, Stevens uses "foliage" here as a figure for poetry. In suggesting that embodying the re-imagined pine in eternal foliage would render this moment permanent, "Credences" anticipates Stevens' late masterpiece "The Rock," which uses the same trope to explore and differentiate between two types of centering, one a potential aspect of imaginative experience generally, the other peculiar to the writing and reading of poetry. The first, the intense sense of "being alive," brought on in this instance by a sudden, powerful "bright sight" (445), is likened to a covering by leaves. A few lines later the leaves appear again, this time as a figure for poetry, which is called "a cure of the ground" (446). A "cover[ing]," which is comparable to the centering associated with the clearly seen pine in "Credences," is ephemeral; sooner or later it will fade, to be replaced by more mundane sorts of experience, perhaps even by a dark despair such as that which afflicts the speaker as "The Rock" opens. Curing poetry, on the other hand, is "beyond forgetfulness" (446), that is, permanent. Reading poems well, "The Rock" suggests, is like eating them; in realizing a poem's "incipient colorings" (446), good readers literally make it part of themselves. Although the intense intellectual and emotional event that is a good reading will—like any other centering—fade with time, strong poetry itself is eternal in that it never loses its potential for inspiring what "The Rock" calls "New senses in the engenderings of sense" (446). Although "Credences" does not develop the argument this extensively, it clearly does differentiate between these two expressions of the "imagination's life" (322)—centerings in general and those associated with the writing and reading of poetry—focusing almost exclusively on the latter from canto IV on to the end of the poem.

Canto III adds importantly to the poem's definition of the center and centering:

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

And happiest folk-land, mostly marriage-hymns.
It is the mountain on which the tower stands,
It is the final mountain.

.....

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

Here again much turns on how we read Stevens' pronouns. The referent of the canto-opening "It" can only be the previous canto's "centre"—which, as we have noted, is linked to the earlier "very thing." The canto proceeds to identify this "It" with the mountain, which I take to be emblematic of the non- or prehuman natural world, and with the tower, signifying the aggregate of human production (particularly, one surmises, the poetic activity featured in the preceding canto) that depends and builds on this world. Together, mountain and tower provide both a vision-enhancing promontory and, since the tower is also likened to a "point of survey," a vantage from which we can take the measure and assess the value of what we see. Finally, the canto equates "It" with the old man who enjoys a centering vision, the "understanding that fulfills his age," like that of the speaker in cantos I and II. "[A]ge" here refers to the old man's advanced years, of course, but also to the era in which he lives, the point being that all individual human viewing necessarily reflects a world view, what "Credences" later calls "The huge decorum, the manner of the time" (326).

To unite mountain, tower, and man in this way is to suggest that, though separate, they are all one: mutually constitutive aspects of the single phenomenon "Credences" calls "the centre." The ways in which the natural world is constitutive of human nature and culture are clear enough, but in what sense can it be said that humanity assists in the creation of nature? Examination of still another avatar of the center, "green's green apogee," indicates how this might be the case. In this context "apogee" refers to a high point or culmination; midsummer is presumably as green as green gets. But when we bring the word's etymology into play, as Stevens so frequently expects us to do, we introduce a very different, even contradictory possibility, for "apogee" derives from the Greek for "away from the earth" (thus its astronomical applications). Strictly speaking, of course, the earth is not green. "Green" is the term we have assigned to certain sensations initiated when the retina of the human eye is excited by the "green" things of the earth. (There is ample evidence throughout Stevens' poetry and prose that he endorsed this then somewhat unconventional account of the relation between the mind and its environment. In "The

Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," for example, he cites with approval C. E. M. Joad's assertion that "every quality of a body resolves itself into an enormous number of vibrations, movements, changes," which "the intellect" translates as "a collection of solid, static objects extended in space" [658]). Although we are, ourselves, parts of the natural world, there is a sense in which, as its observers and "translators," we are diametrically different from anything else therein. Thus the apparent irony that the apogee of what may be nature's most salient and characteristic feature, its greenness, owes its existence in part to the creature that is nature's apogee in the second sense of that word, furthest away from the earth. This irony dissolves, however, in the experience of centering, where viewers, their views, and the world they view become one. Perhaps the simplest way of describing this relationship, which will be discussed at length later in this essay, is that genuinely knowing our worlds involves us in discovering and creating them as well.

The observation that the old man "reads no book" has inspired considerable commentary, most of it, in my judgment, well off the mark. J. Dennis Huston, for example, has written that the old man's

sense of oneness with the external world is achieved not through the mediation of art but by direct and concrete experience: because "His ruddy ancientness / Absorbs the ruddy summer . . .," he is himself a part of the natural perfection. (266)

Bloom makes essentially the same argument, maintaining that the old man is "beyond poetry" (245). Such readings, together with similar responses regarding canto IV's reference to the "Pure rhetoric of a language without words" (324), have led many critics to conclude that "Credences" is a poem about the limitations of poetry and the imagination, a view typified by Bloom's contention that the speaker's attempts to extol poetry are "thwarted by the rival eloquence of mere nature" (243–44). (It is a mystery how nature's "eloquence" can thwart human creation, since—as we have noted above and as Bloom himself acknowledges—nature's eloquence is itself in part a function of that creation.) That the old man "reads no book" but still "fulfills his age" suggests not that the poetry definitive of his age is irrelevant to him, but that he has "absorbed" it, and the shared vision it helps to create, via a kind of cultural osmosis. In this respect, to posit a prosaic illustration, the old man resembles those in our own time who programmatically bridle against authority, long for the open road, or embrace any of the dozens of other "romanticisms" at large in contemporary Western culture—all without having the slightest notion that these were imprinted on our collective psyche two centuries ago by a comparative handful of great poems, not one of which they have read.

To say that the old man "fulfills his age" is to say that he has used the terms of the reigning cultural perspective to their fullest, that is, as a means

of accessing the “very thing,” in this case the scene he views from atop mountain and tower. When Stevens discusses the assumptions and customs that comprise such perspectives, his usual concern is to expose how these inevitably outlive their utility and become impediments to, rather than facilitators of, knowledge and communication. The dross we are told to burn to ash in canto II no doubt consists in large part of such cultural detritus. It is not surprising, therefore, that, though still capable of supporting centerings such as those realized by the old man and by the speaker in cantos I and II, the present world view is pictured as being near exhaustion. The “feeling” that appeases the old man, for example, is said to be “capable of nothing more”; and the speaker’s midsummer idyll occurs on

the last day of a certain year
Beyond which there is nothing left of time.

.....

There is nothing more inscribed nor thought nor felt. . . .
(322)

Any day is the last day of the year that began 365 (or 366) days earlier; but this is not just any day. It is, from the point of view of the current culture, the end of time—the societal “Omega” remarked in “An Ordinary Evening” (400). The culture, like the summer, has achieved optimal ripeness, identified in canto IV as its “utmost” (in “An Ordinary Evening,” Omega’s “dense investiture” [400]) and exemplified in the fulfillment the old man feels as he views his world—presumably the next canto’s “Oley”—from atop the tower that is his era’s contribution to history. From this moment forward, no matter how persistent the “souvenir[s]” (324) of the old man’s world, fresh, significant thought and feeling and art will belong to a new “decorum” (326). To say that there is nothing more “inscribed”—as opposed to “written,” for example, or “composed”—is to emphasize the imminent “pastness” of the current moment, as if its characteristic features already had the aspect of something carved in stone.

Although canto IV goes on to tell us more about the season’s and this age’s “apogee,” it also presents clear signs of impending dissolution. It does so first by pointing out a “limit” to the land of Oley:

One of the limits of reality
Presents itself in Oley when the hay,
Baked through long days, is piled in mows. It is
A land too ripe for enigmas, too serene.
There the distant fails the clairvoyant eye. . . . (323)

Although still, at times, using the term “reality” to mean what we might expect it to—that which exists beyond the human self, independent of its

thoughts and imaginings—Stevens' later work more often assumes a rather different definition. Many critics, after portraying this alternate conception as a simple inversion of the first—reality as a creation of the imagination—go on to characterize Stevens' mature poetry as an endless, unresolved waffling between the two. Such distorting assessments do little justice, however, to Stevens' best and most characteristic work, including "Credences of Summer." For the late Stevens, reality is precisely what is "realized" at the center. In a letter written five years after he finished "Credences," Stevens explains that "when that poem was written my feeling for the necessity of a final accord with reality was at its strongest: reality was the summer of the title of the book in which the poem appeared" (L 719).

When in canto IV the speaker attests to one of reality's limits, therefore, his reference is to a deficiency not of Oley considered as a natural scene, as is the usual critical speculation, but of the collective perspective available to its inhabitants and epitomized by the old man on the tower. This limit is further characterized as a failure on the part of the "distant" as it relates to the "clairvoyant eye," an observation the speaker amplifies by noting that

Things stop in that direction and since they stop
The direction stops and we accept what is
As good. The utmost must be good. . . . (324)

The passage invokes the etymological origin of "utmost," "furthest from the center," to suggest that the current world view is insufficiently "distant," incapable, that is, of encompassing and accounting for all that the mind's eye has become capable of envisioning. Over time, "reality" has changed but Oley's way of seeing it has not. It is helpful to recall here that, in its capacity as a "point of survey," the center expedites measurement as well as vision. Another way of describing the limitations of Oley, then, is to say that it is in need of a fresh survey; new boundaries must be drawn. A similar suggestion is made by the passage's play on the word "direction," which is used here to signify both spatial course and intellectual stance. Selecting a direction, of either type, implies the rejection of others; when things stop in the present direction, it is time to select a different one. It is not, of course, that there literally are no more "Things" beyond the current "utmost," but that these things are too "distant" to be comprehended using the reigning intellectual approach and are thus, in effect, nonexistent to it.

Though still "good" (it is relevant in this context that "good" derives from a Sanskrit word meaning "to hold fast"), Oley is also described as being overly ripe, one step removed from spoilage and decay: "It is / A land too ripe for enigmas" (323). For the residents of Oley, all seems unfolded, transparent. The current way of seeing things has furnished—or,

it is assumed, is capable of furnishing—all the answers; no unsettling questions remain. As we have seen, however, complacent Oley remains oblivious to the challenge presented by the distant and unassimilable, thereby risking a fate like that of the man of bronze in “An Ordinary Evening,” “whose mind was made up and who, therefore, died” (403). We should note as well that “enigma” originally signified not just any riddle but one that is expressed in poetry. The implication is that we should no longer expect significant creative activity to issue from overly ripe, transparent Oley. If any further evidence of impending dissolution were required, it is provided in the speaker’s observation that the land produces “Not evocations but last choirs” (323). Although “choirs” could be construed positively as adding to the festival mentioned in the canto’s last stanza, the fact that these are “last” choirs presents an ominous note as well. To say that the choirs are heard to the exclusion of “evocations” is another way of making the point that this aging Omega of a culture cannot recognize or accommodate the Alpha that is something importantly new and vital.

Although the heightened vision associated with the centering experience is conditioned, as is true of all viewing, by the “decorum” of a given time, such vision can also work, of course, to change a failing decorum and create new ones. Much of the remainder of “Credences,” in fact, can be understood as an account of how such cultural updating is accomplished. This is particularly true of canto V, which elaborates on a notion Stevens had explored earlier in “Description Without Place”: “An age is a manner collected from a queen” (297), and canto X, which describes the role played by poetry in founding a new “manner,” a new “summer’s whole” (326).

III

Before examining how the issues we have been developing play out in the remainder of “Credences,” it would be well to address a quite different view of them, one that, if left unchallenged, could cast serious doubt on the conclusions made here thus far. I refer to the reading of Joseph Riddel, cited in the introduction to this essay, and those of poststructuralist critics generally. No doubt because of the degree to which it embraces qualification and “decreation,” Stevens’ work has received an unusual amount of attention from these critics, who have typically concluded that he shared their theoretical positions or at least that his poetry well illustrated them. Although the deconstructionist wave has long since ebbed, its influence clearly persists. Thus it is still possible for Anca Rosu, in her recent essay “The Theoretical Afterlife of Wallace Stevens,” to cite convincing evidence that “the majority of authors who quote Stevens do so to accompany some deconstructive gesture” (209).

Where Stevens is concerned, poststructuralists have frequently focused, as does Riddel in his critique of “Credences,” on epistemology. His interpretation denies the most basic assumption on which the poem is grounded,

that we can know and meaningfully connect with other beings and things. Our attempts to know "the very thing" are futile, Riddel maintains, because they must "pass through the fiction of perception" (69). Perception is a fiction because it presents us not with "things-in-themselves" but with mere transformations of the sensory stimuli these things prompt in us. He assumes that Stevens agrees, contending that "Credences" endorses this view and its equally negative linguistic corollary: that language, the names we give to our already metaphoric transformations of what we attempt to know, can be no more than figures for figures. Saying, in effect, compounds the meretricious if unavoidable distortions produced by seeing. In such a scheme, metaphors per se are necessarily thrice removed from "the truth." Thus, Riddel claims, the speaker's injunction against the use of "evasive" metaphors is, on the evidence of the poem itself, impossible to observe.

Let me begin my response to Riddel's argument by challenging this last contention, that is, that a linguistic metaphor must be a "negative or mediating force" (69) and that Stevens affirms as much in "Credences of Summer." Like the call in "An Ordinary Evening" for a poetry "untouched / By trope" (402), the speaker's cautions regarding the use of figures should be read not as a denunciation of metaphors generally but simply as a warning against using "evasive," obfuscating ones, the sort he satirizes in poems such as "The Man on the Dump" or that he accuses of "murdering" true metaphors in "Someone Puts a Pineapple Together" (694). Although Stevens would have no quarrel with the presumption that all verbal discourse is figurative, he would not have accepted either a blanket indictment of metaphors or the prior assumption that we cannot really know the objects and beings of our world. "Poetry is metaphor" (907), as Stevens puts it in one of his pithier "Adagia." For the late Stevens the unique *métier* of the metaphor-in-large that is a successful poem, as this essay is endeavoring to show, is precisely its capacity for realizing "the very thing."

In addition to emphasizing epistemological issues such as those raised in Riddel's discussion of "Credences," poststructuralist critics have been especially interested in the more basic, ontological implications of Stevens' work. Here the issue has been not so much whether we could know other beings and things, the tenants of the so-called "object" world beyond the self, but whether there were indeed any things out there to know or any selves or subjects to do the knowing. In arriving at their familiar conclusions—that "subject" and "object" are simply nominal conveniences, necessary fictions—critics of varying stripes have been echoing pronouncements made fifty years ago by Jacques Derrida in his classic critique of Saussurean structuralism, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." Derrida began this seminal work with what amounted to a repudiation of the very concept that is the major focus of "Credences of Summer," the concept, that is, of the center. It had become "necessary" for him, he writes, "to begin thinking that there was no cen-

ter, that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being” (279). Again:

the center receives different forms or names. The history of metaphysics, like the history of the West, is the history of these metaphors and metonymies. Its matrix . . . is the determination of Being as *presence* in all senses of this word. (279)

Prominent among these putative “present-beings,” these metaphors are, of course, the subject and the object. My purpose here, again, is not to rebut such pronouncements but simply to show that “Credences of Summer” neither illustrates nor endorses them. Section II of this essay already should have begun to accomplish that intent. For further evidence—evidence that “Credences” affirms the existence of subjects and objects, that it assumes the former can know and connect with the latter, and that it thus attests to the viability of centers—we need only look closely at canto VII.

Canto VII concludes with a proclamation of the poetic imagination’s ability to create as well as simply discover the object world. Preparing us for this conclusion, the canto begins by explaining why certain poets—perhaps most poets—are unlikely ever to create *or* discover. Unable “to sing in face / Of the object,” these poets “avert themselves / Or else avert the object” (325). In that the second syllable of “avert” derives from the same root as “verse” (the Latin *versus*, meaning “to turn”) and its first syllable denotes negation, we are apparently meant to conclude that such singing does not even deserve to be called poetry. Whether it is the self or the object that is averted, the consequences are the same: any possibility of meaningful engagement between the two is forfeited. In making “of itself that which it could not find” (325), such a sensibility concocts not centering poetry but subjective evasions.

Having shown how poets should not relate to the “objects” that occasion their poems, the canto moves on to describe a better alternative:

Three times the concentrated self takes hold, three times
The thrice concentrated self, having possessed

The object, grips it in savage scrutiny,
Once to make captive, once to subjugate
Or yield to subjugation, once to proclaim
The meaning of the capture, this hard prize,
Fully made, fully apparent, fully found. (325)

I read the passage as an amplification of canto II’s instructions as to how one attains the center. Most critics see it very differently. Isabel MacCaffrey, for example, writes that “The isolation of the singers in section VII focuses Stevens’ post-Kantian belief that we never know reality immediately, that

the 'object' can be 'possessed' but not known" (432). The statement, it seems to me, is mistaken on two counts. First, it makes no distinction between better and worse poets, as if all were equally "avert[ers]." Secondly, it presupposes epistemological and ontological positions that are simply not those of "Credences of Summer" or other of Stevens' best and most characteristic works.

A more satisfactory account of canto VII will recognize first that the three-step process undertaken by the self is not to be confused with a "possession" of the object, for, as the canto's syntax makes clear, possession has already taken place before these steps begin. "Possessed" describes a separate and very different mode of relation, a negative mode in which the self treats the object (or other being) as *merely* an object, subsuming it into its own perspectives and agendas rather than attempting to truly know it. Possession may be an inevitable aspect of one's initial reaction to the appearance of an object; but it must, in Stevens' view, be renounced if real knowledge is to take place. An approach capable of accessing the "meaning" of the object, and thus the center, begins by making it "captive." Since the object has already been possessed and since the effort now is to accomplish a relationship that improves upon possession, "make captive" clearly should not be read, as it usually is, as suggesting that the self is somehow imprisoning the object. I read the phrase as descriptive of something like a temporary extrapolation of the object from its context, a preliminary demarcation that expedites the "savage scrutiny"—canto VII's equivalent of the earlier "Burn everything not part of it to ash"—that is required if one is to reach "the very thing."

The next step is "to subjugate / Or yield to subjugation." Here again the tendency has been to emphasize the potentially negative connotation of "subjugate" to the exclusion of other possibilities. David R. Jarraway, for example, writes:

the "concentred self," time and time again, re-enacts a triple-gesture of power over the object (captivation, first; then, subjugation; finally, proclamation) in order that it may be brought within the purview of the mind's "savage scrutiny." (74)

The problem with this conclusion is that it completely ignores, and would have a difficult time accommodating, the second half of Stevens' statement: "Or yield to subjugation." But under what circumstances can the self's subjugation by an object be considered a cause for elated proclamation? To "subjugate" something is to make it a subject, and, in this context, both primary denotations of "subject" apply. Since both parties can be either the subjugator or the subjugated, both are (or neither is) subject to the other; and, since both can be either the transaction's subject or its object, the customary subject/object dualism simply ceases to apply. That

which was other than the self has become “near”: “Fully made, fully apparent, fully found.”

Stevens’ use of the richly multivalent “apparent” helps explain how “this hard prize” can at one and the same time be both fully made and fully found. Objects are apparent in the sense that they simply become visible; they appear before us (“object” comes from a Latin word for “to be thrown in the way”). To “proclaim / The meaning” of an object, however, is to make it apparent in another sense of that word, one that foregrounds the element of human creativity present in all fresh descriptions and attributions of meaning. The function of the imagination is to make apparent that which is only inchoate in the world that appears to us. The observation that realization of the “hard prize” is not complete until its meaning is “proclaimed” introduces a theme we will explore later in this essay—that saying helps create, indeed, is in some instances tantamount to seeing. It must be noted, too, that “proclaim” denotes not just any saying but one that is public. In stipulating that the final step in the poet’s discovery and creation of the object is to make its meaning public, the speaker is reiterating canto VI’s insistence that the truth of poetry must not be “A hermit’s truth” (324). The products of the imagination, again, must be more than subjective “avertings.”

In explicitly affirming the existence of the object and the self or subject, and in describing the procedures the latter uses to learn and create the “meaning” of the former, canto VII clearly repudiates the poststructuralist axiom that such “present being[s]” do not exist except as “mere” metaphors. Having said this much, however, we are still left with a critical question our discussion has yet to explicitly engage. Is Stevens’ “very thing” simply another name for the presumed, and presumably unknowable, “thing-in-itself”? If not, then what exactly is it one “knows” when one attains the center, as this experience is defined and exemplified in “Credences of Summer”? What is it that is both “Fully made” and “fully found”?

To better understand how “Credences” speaks to this question, it would help to look briefly at “Description Without Place,” completed a year before Stevens wrote “Credences,” in which he addresses the issue more explicitly. Companion poems in many respects, “Description Without Place” and “Credences of Summer” are both centrally concerned with the act of seeing, considered as a type of physical perception as well as a mode of knowing. Both poems, as MacCaffrey has said of “Credences,” also deal “overtly or tacitly” with “being and . . . saying” (423). Most important, both poems present powerful cases for the coincidence of all three processes, making the argument we have been tracing in “Credences”: that in a centering, especially in the “saying/seeing” that comprises strong poems, we not only can come to know “the very thing” but can actually aid in establishing its existence.

“Description Without Place” begins by exploring the difficult notion Stevens calls “seeming.” As depicted in “Description,” seeming is a func-

tion of the imagination, a process that obtains when we recognize things. Although Stevens does not elaborate the mechanics of this process, it appears to combine a preliminary physical sensing (that is, “seeing” or “vision” as perception) with concepts we have come to associate with previous perceptions of what we take to be the same or very similar things, concepts we bring to bear in our determination of what this present thing “is” (seeing or vision as understanding). By subsequently equating seeming with “description” (300), the poem further suggests that seemings presuppose not only the presence of percepts and concepts but also the use of language. There are better and worse seemings. A seeming is “lesser” (297), apparently, when the concepts employed are clichéd or otherwise insufficiently attentive to the object that occasioned the seeming, thus producing a relationship that, like the work of weak poets in “Credences,” is overly subjective and therefore false. A “greater seeming,” on the other hand, resembles the centering experience in “Credences” in that it involves both a “revelation” of and “reconciliation” with the object (301). As with “Credences,” “Description Without Place”—in which “the word is the making of the world” (301)—associates this intense revelatory experience primarily with the “saying” characteristic of successful poetry. What, then, does a seeming reveal?

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

The sun is an example. What it seems
It is and in such seeming all things are. (296)

Stevens’ point is not that seeming presents us with a thing-in-itself but that a seeming is itself a thing and therefore has the same claim to being as does the object that prompted the seeming: It exists as the “seeming of an original in the eye” (297). It is not a Nietzschean (or Riddelian) metaphor for that original object, not what Stevens later in the poem refers to as a “false facsimile” (301).

What Stevens means by “seeming” is perhaps best exemplified in the poem’s famously oblique conclusion, where human discourse is said to be “alive with its own seemings, seeming to be / Like rubies reddened by rubies reddening” (302). The passage is not read correctly, I think, unless its gerundive phrase is understood to mean “seeming [*in order*] to be”; that is, the original object not only provides the occasion for an act of seeming performed by the self or subject but is itself said to be actively seeming: “the sun is something seeming.” The concluding pronouncement’s first “rubies” refers to the “original” things, the occasions of our seeming. We cannot know these directly since, until we discover and create them, they exist only as latencies. We experience them as “red” (or, for that mat-

ter, “rubies”) because this is their aspect in the “rubies reddening” that is our seeming of them.

“Description Without Place” importantly anticipates a more extended treatment of these themes in “The Rock,” where, as in canto VI of “Credences,” the symbol of the rock signifies both the “external” object, the “mountain half way green” (324), and the subject, “the main of things, the mind” (447). As I have written of “The Rock” elsewhere:

There the external world is said to consist of “gray particular[s]” that exist in isolation, unaware of one another and of their potential for vital connection but invested with “incipient colorings.” The function of the imagination, acting as what Stevens calls the world’s “rhapsodist” (etymologically, one who “stitches together”), is to bring to realization the world’s colorings and connections—its forms, essential similarities, and physical laws. (287)

The “seemings” presented by the world’s particulars evoke from the self an imaginative response, a seeming, that realizes what was only incipient in these particulars. This argument is basically the same as that suggested by the use of “apparent” at the end of canto VII in “Credences.” But “Description” emphasizes an important additional point, one that “Credences” develops less fully: that when we make and find the objects of this world, they are also making us—“in such seemings all things,” including the seer, “are.”

In “An Ordinary Evening” and other of his later works, Stevens carries this logic to its radical culmination: If the subject and the object bring one another into being, then there is a sense in which each literally is the other. As Stevens puts it in another of his “Adagia,” “Nothing is itself taken alone. Things are because of interrelations or interactions” (903). The claim is made still more explicitly in “Study of Images I,” a poem Stevens completed during the period in which he was at work on “An Ordinary Evening”:

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

Participants of its being. It is, we are.
He is, we are. (395)

The passage describes an epiphanic awakening to the center, a moment in which knowing collapses into being, revelation into reconciliation, epistemology into ontology. Here the object and the subject, each found and remade in the images of strong poetry, are no longer conceived of as constituting a “duality.” Each, while retaining its own identity, exists as an aspect of the single entity established in their conjunction. In such a state,

as in canto VII of "Credences," all has become near. Knowledge of the world is indistinguishable from self-knowledge; and "the very object that we seek," far from being an unknowable thing-in-itself, becomes a thing that is in part ourselves.

Although it is true that different subjects will make and find different meanings in what, for all practical purposes, is the same "very thing," it does not follow that all conception is therefore wholly the product of individual human imaginings. If we come to different understandings, it is still the case, on the evidence of the poems we have been examining, that the object world helps shape them all. Moreover, if, in the process of knowing other beings and things, we ourselves become new and different beings, what sense can it make to say that the self that initiated this process has totally determined it?²

In "Credences of Summer," as noted above, the revelatory and connective experiences associated with the center are initiated primarily by the poetic imagination. Amplifying eloquently on the tribute begun in canto VII, canto VIII tells of a "trumpet of morning" that heralds, not the glorious rising of the sun, but the ascendancy of poetry:

The trumpet of morning blows in the clouds and through
The sky. It is the visible announced,
It is the more than visible, the more
Than sharp, illustrious scene. The trumpet cries
This is the successor of the invisible.

This is its substitute in stratagems
Of the spirit. . . .

.....
The resounding cry
Is like ten thousand tumblers tumbling down

To share the day. (325)

We should emphasize that, as depicted in this passage, poetry does not announce the visible. As is suggested by the trope on "apparent" in canto VII, poetry *is* "the visible announced." Stevens returns to this important distinction frequently in his later work, notably in the much remarked declaration that opens canto XII of "An Ordinary Evening": "The poem is the cry of its occasion, / Part of the *res* itself and not about it" (404). Poetry, that is, does not re-present; it presents. Poetry does not convey—as so many contemporary theorists would have us believe—"belated" versions of things that preexist the poem. The *res* a poem presents is itself, "itself" being a creation of and by the otherwise unknowable things that are its occasion.³

Canto VIII characterizes poetry further as “the successor of the invisible,” the inheritor, that is, of the roles that traditional religious beliefs formerly played in our “stratagems / Of the spirit.” In that poetry is likened to the “visible announced” and “announce” comes from the Latin for “bringing news,” Stevens may well be suggesting here that poetry should be considered the new, secular gospel. The “resounding cry” that meets poetry’s assumption of these responsibilities is compared to the sound of “ten thousand tumblers tumbling down,” an allusion to the expulsion of the Satanic legions, which, in Milton’s account, was caused by the ten thousand thunders unleashed upon them by Christ at the conclusion of the battle for heaven. The orthodox view holds that Satan’s fate is a tragic falling off from a condition of “invisibility,” that is, pure spirituality, into “the visible,” the material and all the ills it is heir to. “Credences,” however, welcomes, even celebrates the Fall, claiming the material as poetry’s proper element and referring to the rebellious angels’ descent almost lightheartedly as a “tumbling.”

But poetry is not just “the visible announced” or even “the successor of the invisible”; it is “the more than visible, the more / Than sharp, illustrious scene.” What Stevens might mean by the arcane “more than visible” is suggested at the end of canto VI, where the “rock of summer” is pictured as being

half-way in bloom
 And then half way in the extremest light
 Of sapphires flashing from the central sky,
 As if twelve princes sat before a king. (325)

In all likelihood, the passage alludes to Revelation 21, where the new Jerusalem is said to have twelve gates on which were inscribed the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel, and twelve foundations, which bore the names of the twelve apostles. As described in Revelation 21:23, the city “had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the Glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb *is* the light thereof” (italics added). In “Credences of Summer” it is God’s “successor,” the poet, who illuminates what the sun by itself cannot.

There is ample evidence supporting such a reading elsewhere in the poem, especially in canto II’s “Trace the gold sun” figure. The figure directs our attention to the objects around us, which, since light is experienced only in and through their appearance, can be considered the sun’s traces. Poets, like everything else under the sun, are dependent on that light. But to “trace” can also be to “harness,” a quite different process in which the human role is to actively lead rather than passively register. We are clearly meant to think of Apollo here—in another of his roles the god of poetry—who traces his horses each morning, preparing them and their chariot to carry the sun out from its nightly resting place and across “the

whitened sky." In canto III we hear, further, that the spent sun "rests" on "the final mountain" (323), an observation whose presence in the poem would be difficult to explain without reference to the myth we have been recounting. Construing the figure in this fashion shifts the emphasis from finding to the making half of the making/finding enterprise discussed in canto VII, the implication being that poetry, or the poet, is capable of "leading" the sun. "Description Without Place" makes the same point when it claims that poetry is "More explicit than the experience of sun" (301). In that "explicit" derives from the Latin *explicare*, meaning "to unfold" or "open out," the point seems to be, again, that poetry has the power to enable realizations (depicted in "Credences" as centerings, in "Description" as greater seemings) that, though based on the world illuminated by the sun, reveal what the sun alone cannot: the more than visible.

We should note, finally, that canto VIII also belies Riddel's claim that meaningful connection with "the very thing" would presuppose "pure or unmediated perception" (69). The canto, in fact, very conspicuously acknowledges the mediating nature of poetry:

The trumpet supposes that
A mind exists, aware of division, aware
Of its cry as clarion. . . . (325–26)

Whether "aware" and "its" refer to the generic "mind" or, more likely, to the "trumpet" of poetry, the point is the same. The poet capable of articulating the more than visible, and realizing the center thereby, does so not by avoiding "divisions" between self and object but, after burning away bias and clichéd preconceptions, by creatively mediating between them.

IV

As was noted at the beginning of this essay, most critics of "Credences of Summer" find a pronounced difference, even discontinuity, between its first several cantos and the remainder of the poem; and nearly all of them deem that remainder a falling off. We noted Vendler's judgment, for example, that "the oneness with the here and now diminishes" after the first three cantos (234) and Bloom's that the poem "grows more and more dark" after its fourth canto (244). There can be no denying that centerings are transitory and the views that once helped enable them come in time to be obstacles instead. But, having made these points, "Credences" goes on not to bemoan the passing of the heightened experience, or to suggest that it never really happened, but to show that it can be repeated and how this is to be accomplished.

One finds evidence for such a reading throughout the poem, often in passages that seem to invite quite different conclusions. Take, for example, canto II's description of the peace at the center as a "Joy of such permanence, right ignorance / Of change still possible" (323). The difficulty with

this passage, of course, is that it asks us to believe in the permanence of a condition that it admits is subject to change. In "An Ordinary Evening," Stevens develops the same issue around another orphic, seemingly self-contradictory construction, "a permanence composed of impermanence" (403). The later poem gives the matter considerably more attention and brings it to a greater degree of resolution, but both poems clearly indicate that the real ignorance, a "wrong" ignorance, would be to despair over the fact of change. Right ignorance of impending change is not a delusory, self-imposed myopia but a mature awareness that change, for all its destructiveness, is what enables one's experiences of permanence in the first place. There can be no further centering without the "change still possible."

"Credences" does not, after all, end with the decayed scene presided over by canto IX's "civil bird" (326). The ruined enterprise detailed there does not represent, as so many readers have insisted, the poem's last word:

this complex falls apart.
And on your bean pole, it may be, you detect
Another complex of other emotions, not
So soft, so civil, and you make a sound,
Which is not part of the listener's own sense. (326)

The bird's bean pole, it is true, can be read as an ironic echo of the tower featured earlier in the poem; but the point of the comparison is not, as many critics would have it, that all such constructions, all centerings and the world views that inform them, are specious. Canto IX is simply describing the point at which the cultural extinction predicted in cantos III and IV has become obvious for all to see, where the old man's tower no longer promotes real vision. Similarly, the listener's inability to make sense of the bird's sound suggests not that linguistic and other conventions are universally ineffectual but simply that persons committed to defunct "directions" will be unwilling or unable to accept new ones, will find new "sound[s]" too distant for comprehension. Far from being some sort of knell, the bird's call should be understood as, in the terms of canto IV, an "evocation" of the new poem that is the focus of the final canto.

As its opening lines demonstrate especially well, canto X is rife with suggestions that a fresh "summer's whole" (326) is in the making:

The personae of summer play the characters
Of an inhuman author, who meditates
With the gold bugs. . . . (326)

The juxtaposition of "personae" and "characters" in the first line all but compels the reader to question how the poem distinguishes between these near synonyms and how it might be that the former "plays" the latter. As

I read them, both words convey ideas that are very much in keeping with the interpretation of "Credences" advanced in this essay. "[P]ersonae" are recurring and universal, that is, archetypal. The conspicuously generic mothers, fathers, and lovers of canto I, for example, and the queen, king, and soldier of canto V—whatever other contributions they may make to the poem—are personae. Characters, on the other hand, are the specific incarnations in which such archetypes are realized. Reflective of what the next stanza calls "The huge decorum, the manner of the time," incarnations can differ widely, depending on the perspectives of the authors and ages that produce them. It could be said, then, that universal personae manifest themselves through the specific roles, the characters, they play in successive world views.

Something of the same reasoning explains why Stevens calls the author of the new poem "inhuman." On the one hand, the poet, as conceived by Stevens, is obliged to find and create "the poetry of his time," in which effort he or she is largely dependent on "a vast world of other people from which he derives himself and through himself his poetry" (835). On the other hand, poets—major ones, at any rate—are finders and makers of what can scarcely be experienced without them, "the more than visible." Poets are thus both ardent participants in the human community, that is, "inhuman," and at the same time this community's larger than life, that is, "inhuman" bringers of light. Even the playful reference to "gold bugs" carries significant thematic weight. This obvious allusion to Poe's "The Gold Bug," the plot of which turns on the solving of an enigma, is meant to remind of us of Oley, that land "too ripe for enigmas." The suggestion is that, just as a preponderance of overly ripe, "made up" minds betrays a society's spiritual poverty, so one sign of a healthier culture is the quality of the questions it recognizes and entertains.

Finally, it seems especially significant that, instead of the more usual "poet" or any of several other suitable possibilities, Stevens calls the creator of this new poem an "author." "Author" derives from the Latin *augere*, "to increase." In a context that puts such a premium on the full as well as the fresh, the point seems to be that the role of strong poets is to enlarge cultures whose "utmost" is no longer enough, whose perspectives have come to impede rather than expedite vision. Enlargement of a culture, it is important to stipulate, represents a subsumption, not a rejection, of that culture (still another important anticipation of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," which calls for an "imagining of reality" that, though it must be "recent," will at the same time be "alive with age" [397]). The new creation described in canto X precisely exemplifies the redeeming "larger poem for a larger audience" heralded in canto I of "An Ordinary Evening" (397), a poem capable of restoring what the last line of "Credences" calls "a youthful happiness" (326). The majority opinion regarding these concluding words is well captured in Bloom's bleak assessment:

“all that we know of a youthful happiness is that it must grow old and sad” (252). But in “Credences of Summer,” “youthful happiness” refers not to a condition enjoyed during a single, brief period early in life but to an experience consistently available to those who demonstrate imagination and will enough to win through to “the centre.” “Credences of Summer” is not a lament over the loss of an earthly paradise but a celebration of the fact it can be regained.

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Notes

¹ Wallace Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 322. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with page number(s) only in parentheses.

² In *Late Stevens: The Final Fiction*, B. J. Leggett adds an intriguing twist to these issues with his contention that “in ‘Credences of Summer’ and throughout the late poems Stevens the poet imagines reality as the imagination of a mind independent of the poet” (9). Elaborating a scheme broached in his earlier *Wallace Stevens and Poetic Theory*, Leggett maintains that, for the late Stevens, reality lies not in the world beyond the self but in a “cosmic mind” (*Poetic Theory* 194) that imagines that world: “material objects are in fact playing roles dictated by” this mind (*Final Fiction* 9). A “version of the supreme fiction” (*Final Fiction* 3), this supreme imagination represents the culmination of Stevens’ effort, inaugurated in “Credences,” to “shift from the privileging of the human imagination in the early poems . . . toward an attempt to articulate a reality independent of the observer’s mind” (*Final Fiction* 6). This reality is embodied in the later poetry “not merely as description or illustration but as a belief given concrete form, realized” (*Final Fiction* 3). Leggett locates such embodiments in, for example, “the imagination that sits enthroned” of “The Auroras of Autumn” (*Final Fiction* 12) and the “fantastic consciousness” of “The Rock” (*Final Fiction* 102).

In this scheme, of course, engagements with the world beyond the self remain wholly subjective. The cosmic mind that imagines that world is, after all, the product of another imagination, the human poet’s. Leggett acknowledges as much, observing that “Any attempt by the poet to depict a reality independent of his depiction would encounter [such a] paradox” (*Final Fiction* 10). The problem with this description of reality, however, is not just that it is self-refuting. Whatever relevance it may have to Stevens’ late poems, it does not apply very well to “Credences.” If “Credences” construes reality as a cosmic mind that creates the material world by imagining it, a mind that is—in Leggett’s terms—“beyond the [human] mind” (*Final Fiction* 7), what then (to pose the most obvious of several possible objections) are we to make of the conclusion to canto VII? Why, if a higher power has already created the object world, does Stevens have his surrogate, the poem’s speaker, so meticulously describe the arduous process undertaken by poets as they not only find but make this world? A more plausible account, it seems to me, is the one that emerges from the argument of the present essay: reality is neither independent nor wholly the creation of the human imagination but resides in the mutually constitutive accord that “Credences” identifies as “the centre.”

³ Readers familiar with the interpretation of “Credences” advanced by Thomas J. Hines in *The Later Poetry of Wallace Stevens* may consider certain of his conclusions similar to some of those presented in this essay. These similarities are more apparent than actual, however; our accounts differ considerably on most of their important particulars. Chief among these differences is that Hines’s argument, one of the com-

paratively few that considers "Credences" a positive poem and emphasizes Stevens' depiction of centers in arriving at that judgment, embraces the notion of "belatedness." Thus his contention, for example, that "The poet, as Heidegger writes, can only reveal Being and the truth of Being by capturing it in language which . . . the philosopher calls 'the house of Being'" (230).

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It Must Remember: Wallace Stevens, Poetic Memorial, and September 11, 2001

FREDERICK COYE HEARD

Then there are the visitors to the park. The artifacts on display represent the confluence of a number of cultural tides, patriotic and multidevotional and retro hippy. The visitors move quietly in the floating aromas of candlewax, roses and bus fumes. There are many people this mild evening and in their voices, manner, clothing and in the colour of their skin they recapitulate the mix we see in the photocopied faces of the lost.

—Don DeLillo, “In the Ruins of the Future”

IN A DECEMBER 2001 ARTICLE printed in both *Harper's* and London's *Guardian*, Don DeLillo describes a threefold task that September 11, 2001, presents to writers: “In its desertion of every basis for comparison, the event asserts its singularity. There is something empty in the sky. The writer tries to give memory, tenderness, and meaning to all that howling space.” Memory, tenderness and meaning—DeLillo's prescription closely resembles the activity he describes at the impromptu memorial that appeared around the statue of George Washington in Union Square Park:

In Union Square Park, about two miles north of the attack site, the improvised memorials are another part of our response. The flags, flowerbeds and votive candles, the lamppost hung with paper airplanes, the passages from the Koran and the Bible, the letters and poems, the cardboard John Wayne, the children's drawings of the twin towers, the hand-painted signs for Free Hugs, Free Back Rubs, the graffiti of love and peace on the tall equestrian statue. (DeLillo)

Six years later, the impromptu memorials are gone. They sprang up in the days immediately after the towers fell, rising spontaneously to meet the needs of mid-September 2001, but time has passed, the memorials of our first response have gradually disappeared, and we are left looking for

other ways to give memory, tenderness, and meaning to an unspeakable event that still bears no name other than its now infamous date. DeLillo argues that the “event itself has no purchase on the mercies of analogy or simile. We have to take the shock and horror as it is. But living language is not diminished. The writer wants to understand what this day has done to us” (DeLillo). The critic, also, wants to understand that day, and Wallace Stevens, a poet ceaselessly exploring the relationship between the imagination and reality, the imagined and the real, the culturally mediated experience and the apparently bare fact, offers an invaluable framework for both taking the horror “as it is” and understanding what that imaged and imagined reality has done to us.

DeLillo’s three gifts—memory, tenderness, meaning—lie near the heart of Stevens’ conception of poetry and what it has to offer in the wake of the World Trade Center’s collapse. The poet’s role, Stevens tells us in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” is “to help people to live their lives,”¹ but the “howling space” in the footprint of the towers presents a number of difficult questions to any poet who takes up Stevens’ and DeLillo’s charges: How can poetry help us live in the face of such destruction? What meaning can a poet find at Ground Zero? How can we appropriately memorialize the event and its victims? In this particular case, how can Stevens’ intellectual brand of modernist verse help us live with this trauma and remember an event of enormous physical, psychological, and symbolic violence? These questions—operating simultaneously in intellectual, aesthetic, and ethical registers—present significant challenges to any writer who approaches the experiential site of Ground Zero. Stevens’ response to these questions begins in his description of the poet’s function, a role that he names only after making it clear what that function cannot be:

What is his function? Certainly it is not to lead people out of the confusion in which they find themselves. Nor is it, I think, to comfort them while they follow their readers to and fro. I think that his function is to make his imagination theirs and that he fulfills himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others. His role, in short, is to help people to live their lives. (660–61)

This passage sets two limitations on an otherwise ambitious claim for the role of the poet: the poet cannot lead people out of confusion—that is, she cannot explain the world to them, cannot make it palatable to the understanding—and she cannot comfort them—she cannot romanticize, anesthetize, or otherwise gloss over the reality of pain. The poet (and therefore the poem and the memorial) helps us to live, but she does not give us the answers or dry our tears. Instead, she helps us by making her imagination ours. The meaning of that activity becomes clearer through an exploration of why the poet cannot simply comfort or explain. Stevens’

exploration of “poetry” and its relationship to reality and the imagination associates that term with sculpture, architecture, and several arts other than verse. His using the Colleoni and Andrew Jackson statues in “The Noble Rider” to elucidate the limits and possibilities of poetry are only two examples; his essay “Imagination as Value” provides another example that, for the purposes of the present essay, proves uncannily appropriate: “When does a building stop being a product of the reason and become a product of the imagination? If we raise a building to an imaginative height, then the building becomes an imaginative building since height in itself is imaginative” (735). Because Stevens’ investigations press against a purely verbal definition of poetry, I will use the term “poetic memorial” to describe whatever fits Stevens’ description of poetry and serves as a memorial to the World Trade Center, whether that memorial is made of words, paint, concrete, steel, or any other material.

The poetic memorial cannot simply comfort. Milton J. Bates begins his essay “Pain Is Human: Wallace Stevens at Ground Zero” by recalling the first literature class he taught after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. He, like countless other people, turned to poetry as a means of confronting the day’s events, allowing, in Bates’s words, the “masters of the language to speak for us” (168). Eliot, Auden, Yeats, Larkin, and other poets were read aloud in classrooms across the country and in specially organized poetry readings, but, by and large, no one was reading Wallace Stevens. Bates offers a simple explanation for this trend: “The sad fact is that Stevens’ poetry, though intellectually demanding and esthetically satisfying, has long seemed emotionally unsympathetic even to sympathetic readers” (169). Bates acknowledges that Stevens’ implied poet “resorts repeatedly to strategies that avoid confronting the suffering of others” (169) with the result that “[t]he ‘Stevens of Stevens’ poetry will never be the person to whom we turn first when we are in pain” (179). The emotional distance of his verse makes a compelling explanation for why Stevens was absent from the list of poets to whom we turned for consolation in those first days and hours after the attacks. Stevens’ claim that poetry “has to content the reason concerning war” (218) does not operate in the same emotional register as Auden’s “We must love one another or die” or Yeats’s “Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.” An unexpected and devastating attack on civilians would seemingly call for poets of catharsis or revenge who would, like Shakespeare, “Cry ‘Havoc,’ and let slip the dogs of war” or else, like Dylan Thomas, “rage against the dying of the light,” but Stevens’ snowmen, blackbirds, and blue guitars do neither of these things.

Focusing mainly on “Esthétique du Mal,” Bates argues that Stevens’ poetry provides a necessary second-order response to tragedy. The poem, he points out, was inspired in part by a letter questioning the appropriateness and utility of Stevens’ poetry during the Second World War. This letter, written to the *Kenyon Review* in 1944 by a soldier serving in the European theater, “argued that in time of war the world needs more [poetic] commandos and

fewer esthetes" (173). In a time of war, the argument would follow, people need either to stir up martial fervor and patriotic pride or, perhaps, to mourn their dead in a properly heroic fashion. It simply is not the right time for the seemingly "academic" epistemological hair-splitting that characterizes Stevens' verse. His esoteric (and somewhat idiosyncratic) treatises about "reality" and "imagination" would best be saved for peacetime when the primal stakes of life and death are less pressing, but an examination of reality and imagination, terms that Bates modifies to "nature" and "culture," is exactly what "Esthétique du Mal" offered to 1944.

"Esthétique du Mal" opens by drawing a clear line between the natural (the erupting Vesuvius) and the cultural (an aesthete lounging in a café writing letters about the volcano and the sublime). Vesuvius and its eruption are natural; the sublime spectacle and "groaning" of the mountain are cultural layers added by the human observer. The first section of "Esthétique" ends,

Except for us, Vesuvius might consume
In solid fire the utmost earth and know
No pain (ignoring the cocks that crow us up
to die). That is a part of the sublime
From which we shrink. And yet, except for us,
The total past felt nothing when destroyed. (277)

Volcanoes do not care that they erupt, and the natural world does not take the eruption as an act of personified evil. Bates argues that the "same is true, by analogy, of physiological phenomena such as death and pain, which are in themselves morally and esthetically neutral. By mythologizing these natural events, culture gives them another negative valence. They not only hurt, but are also bad and ugly" (174). War, says Bates, straddles the line between nature and culture. Pain and death in war have their natural, bodily aspects, but they are culturally conditioned by the reasons for fighting as well as the martial or funereal representations of pain and death. If pain were purely natural, then it would be innocent; human cultural additions—whether the cultural conditions of war or the pathetic fallacy applied to Vesuvius—increase the suffering caused by pain by adding moral guilt or evil to the naturally innocent (innocently natural) phenomenon. According to Bates, this relationship between pain and guilt presents us with a dilemma. After an event like September 11,

we turn instinctively to the cultural forms of religion, poetry, music, art, philosophy, and politics when trying to make sense of the slaughter. The attacks were culturally motivated, after all, and took culturally calculated forms. On the other hand, we recoil from the additional suffering in which this process involves us and look for solace in unthinking nature. (179)

Do cultural strategies for finding meaning in a painful experience necessarily inflict additional suffering on those who remember? In the case of the World Trade Center attacks, the answer is “yes”: to the degree that the deaths in Manhattan that Tuesday morning were not innocently natural, understanding the event—assigning thematic meaning to it—would cause those who remember to suffer more than they would if they experienced only the naturalness of death. The increased suffering that accompanies understanding does not necessarily make understanding unethical—hiding the moral terror of the attacks under a romanticized innocence would do further violence to those we remember—but it does show that meaning is linked problematically with ethical concerns in the experience of violence.

The retreat into idealized, unthinking nature fails because it is itself a cultural response: “Herein lies another paradox: a world completely devoid of our fictions exists only in our dreams” (Bates 178). As Stevens constantly reminds his readers, there is no choice between living in the (cultural) imagination or living in (natural) reality. “Man and Bottle,” a poem concerned with contenting the reason about the realities of war, begins, “The mind is the great poem of winter” that “Destroys romantic tenements / Of rose and ice” (218); that which destroys the outdated forms of the imagination and prepares the way for reality is itself a poem, a product of the imagination. Even the mind of winter—the attempted retreat from romanticism into the cold, hard facts of reality—is another mode of the imagination. If a poem attempts to comfort its audience by denying or ignoring the cultural conditions of the event—by placing pain and death in an indulgent fantasy of bare nature free from politics and culture—then it falsifies emotion and fails to do its readers any service. A memorial that attempted this path of escape would not be a memorial but a flight from memory, a betrayal of both those it supposedly remembers and those who need to remember. We need Stevens’ poetry, Bates argues, for just this reason: “Without its austere but salutary critique of our visceral responses, those responses are apt to become self-indulgent, derivative, or even dishonest” (180). The poet helps us to live our lives, in part, by exposing and preventing self-indulgent solace. The poetic memorial must hold our memory to the event, no matter how painful, and cut off our retreat down a romanticized, perhaps less painful but ultimately dishonest, interpretation of tragedy.

The role of a poetic memorial cannot be offering its audience comfort at the expense of understanding. Conversely, its role cannot be to explain the event it remembers, to offer a coherent nugget of comprehensible meaning to its audience, or, in Stevens’ words, “to lead people out of the confusion in which they find themselves” (660). The events of September 11, 2001, were and are steeped in confusion. Setting aside the confusion that crippled the official response of multiple government agencies, the general public, through news media and especially live television coverage, watched in real time a series of events that we were not equipped to understand. The

crash of Flight 11 into WTC 1 was assumed to be accidental—but how could such an accident happen—until the second plane hit the second tower—could this be intentional? But who would want to do such a thing? How could it be possible for them to do it? How many more planes? Even when the immediate facts of the terrorist attacks came to light, we did not and still do not have a clear explanation of the roots of the attacks that go back decades (longer?) and involve the actions of multiple US administrations and foreign governments both extant and defunct. Along with and beyond this fog of history, we face the silent, excessive specter of our own experience. We saw death on an unimaginable scale. We saw—we sat in front of millions of screens multiplying the scene of violence—and we watched thousands of deaths in an instant. We watched the screen—but this time it was really happening—as the obscene script of Hollywood’s disaster fantasy was replayed again and again and again. There, in lower Manhattan and before our eyes, a group of men whose motivation remains incomprehensible—what else do we mean when we call them fanatics or madmen—realized an event that we could not imagine but which had been the object of cultural fantasy for decades. The deaths, the thousands of deaths each absolute, each individual, each final, hidden inside the towers as we watched them fall—no memorial can explain the destruction of the World Trade Center in a way that ends this confusion and brings the event within the scope of our understanding.

While Bates shows Stevens’ warning against unreflective escapism, John Kertzer, in his essay “The Course of the Particular: On the Ethics of Literary Singularity,” effectively traces Stevens’ rationale for arguing that poetry cannot lead people out of confusion and into a masterful understanding of their world. Stevens’ argument is based on the tension between what “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” calls particles and principles:

The major abstraction is the idea of man
And major man is its exponent, abler
In the abstract than in his singular,

More fecund as principle than particle. . . . (336)

“Particle” refers to the individual human being, to “these separate figures one by one”; “principle” names our tendency to generalize and “see only one” (336). The principle generates meaning through its position in a system of generalizing abstractions; the particle confronts us with the absolute, irreplaceable singularity of an object, person, or event. Kertzer describes his purpose as exploring “the rhetoric of singularity in order to detect its ‘final finding,’ that is, its aesthetic and ethical limit” (207). He pursues this purpose by setting systems of meaning and morality over against the singularity of aesthetic experience and ethical responsibility.

Beginning in the realm of meaning and interpretation, Kertzer points toward the limits of total systematization and absolute singularity. The expansive limit of criticism approaches “a glimpse of literature conceived as one ongoing discourse—a grand intertextual poem, myth, or conversation forever in progress” (208). In this grand vision, everything is meaningful, but nothing has value as a particular: a work has meaning only as part of the expansive whole. The individual aesthetic experience of a poem (novel, sculpture, etc.) disappears, sacrificed to the generalizations of systematic meaning. Kertzer continues, “Although the specificity of a literary work may strike us forcefully on first reading, it is difficult to define because all the modes of definition at our disposal have the perverse effect of depriving a work of its particularity. Explanations inevitably generalize” (209). Meaning develops from relations within a system, but system building effaces the necessarily singular aesthetic experience.

The opposite limit of criticism, a passion for the irreducible particle, insists on the value of individual works and increases the importance of the singular experience, but it achieves this valuation by sacrificing expressible or even intelligible meaning. In Kertzer’s words: “Insofar as something is truly unique, it is unknowable and unsayable, because knowing and saying both rely on signification, which operates through equivalences” (212). Meaning and singularity are inversely related; the absolute limit of systematized meaning would annihilate experience, and the absolute limit of singularity would save experience but render it meaningless. The inverse relationship, in Kertzer’s view, is not equal: “Neither extreme is attainable, but the path to the first is more inviting than the path to the second. The first promises glory, the second threatens ruin” (209). Principles offer an expansive beatific vision; particles point down a narrowing path of responsibility that leads somewhere beyond the limits of intelligibility.

An absolute choice between the two may not be necessary or even possible—these are, after all, imagined limits of perception. We must keep in mind that, like the “first idea” of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” the natural immediacy of spontaneous experience is also an imagined thing; an experience totally free from the work of the imagination is itself a product of the imagination. The choice is further complicated by its ethical implications: “The paradox of literary singularity, which is impenetrable to the critical understanding that explicates it, thus corresponds to a comparable ethical dilemma. Ethical insights, like aesthetic ones, become intelligible only within a larger system framed by general principles and rules, but that very generality dispels the uniqueness of the insight and the urgency of its call” (Kertzer 225). Like the expansive pole of criticism, systems that claim universal (or categorical) principles for moral action achieve their universality by sacrificing the individual instance and the particular person involved, but insisting on ethical singularity threatens the intelligibility and the applicability of any ethical norm: “Slavish conformity to the rule obscures the justice of individual cases; excessive

insistence on peculiarity (the exception to the rule) threatens the law's authority" (Kertzer 226).

Kertzer's description corresponds to the first aporia of justice in Jacques Derrida's "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority' ": "for a decision to be just and responsible, it must . . . be both regulated and without regulation, it must preserve the law and also destroy or suspend it enough to have to reinvent it in each case" (251). Justice requires effacing the general law for the sake of the particular judgment and, simultaneously, making a lawful judgment. Therefore, according to Derrida's second aporia, a just decision is not a choice of either the singular or the universal; it is the paradoxical choice of both. This decision is impossible and, therefore, undecidable in a way more radical than simple indecision. The final aporia of justice reflects what Kertzer alludes to as the urgency of an ethical insight's call: "justice, however unrepresentable it remains, does not wait. It is that which must not wait. . . . It cannot provide itself with the infinite information and the unlimited knowledge of conditions, rules or hypothetical imperatives that could justify it" (Derrida 255). Justice delayed is not justice; our responsibility to the other demands an immediate decision and cannot wait for us to glean all the information we would need to apply the rule of law. As Kertzer reminds us, the "ethical imperative occurs instantaneously; only later can we assess its wider implications" (225).

Ethical decisions are always urgent and radically individual. The unvarying, bureaucratic application of rules does not create justice, but we cannot make a just decision without passing—singularly, impossibly—through the general rule of law. Likewise, any rhetorical approach to singularity—whether an aesthetic experience, the illusive present moment, or the private experience of pain—must work through gesture, playing a role similar to that of John the Baptizer in Grünewald's *Isenheimer* altarpiece. In Grünewald's painting, as in much Christian iconography, St. John stands to one side of the picture with his eyes and hands pointing the viewer toward the representation of the Christ. The presence of John, who was not the Christ but only a precursor pointing others beyond himself to the one who would follow, presents a metacritical visual grammar reminding the devout from within the painting that the painting itself is not an object of worship or a satisfactory image of divinity but only a signpost, an aesthetic gesture directing the worshiper's attention to something beyond the particular representation and ultimately unrepresentable. In like manner, Kertzer insists that "the rhetoric of singularity is positional: it points from a distance at an untouchable source" (223). Also like the Baptizer, this rhetoric points toward its own imminent replacement; because no rhetorical system can adequately describe the singularity of an experience, experience always undermines language and requires rhetoric to continuously change as it circles around the uniqueness of the event.

The poetic memorial cannot "lead people out of the confusion in which they find themselves" (660). It cannot "give meaning to" an event or a life.

To create meaning, a memorial would necessarily have to efface the particularity of what it remembers; it would destroy that which it supposedly remembers. This is, perhaps, especially true for a memorial for September 11, 2001: to repeat DeLillo's phrase, "In its desertion of every basis for comparison, the event asserts its singularity." In a passage that I will revisit shortly, Slavoj Žižek reminds us of the key point of any ethical stance on the Twin Towers: "the terrifying death of each individual is absolute and incomparable" (51–52). The life and death of each of the 2,973 victims of terrorism on September 11, 2001, was absolutely singular, and that particularity, those nearly three thousand particularities, must not be erased, compressed, or otherwise compromised for the sake of a knowable or sayable understanding of the day. The only ethical position is, following Emmanuel Levinas, the irreducible experience of the "face" of the other. My responsibility to the other person rests entirely on this individual encounter in which there are no generalization and no substitution. Levinas, in a passage from "God and Philosophy" (one quoted by Kertzer), insists on the absolute uniqueness of my responsibility to the other: "it obliges me as someone unreplaceable and unique, someone chosen. Inasmuch as it calls upon my responsibility it forbids me any replacement" (Levinas 143). Each of us—the poet, the audience, the memorial itself—is called to individually by the face of the other, and that call demands that our response be equally, that is absolutely, singular. In the same essay, Levinas insists that "the ethical moment is not founded on any preliminary structure of theoretical thought, on language or on any particular language" (148). The ethical moment, like the aesthetic, lies beyond the grasp of language, and rhetoric can only gesture toward a singularity that exceeds its general tropes.

I have, so far, followed Stevens' grammatical distinction in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" and treated comforting an audience and ending their confusion as separate activities. Although this heuristic distinction is convenient for conceptual clarity, Stevens points out that ease and understanding are closely, and deceptively, related. In canto X of "Es-thétique du Mal," Stevens describes a nostalgic man who seeks in "reality" an escape from pain:

Reality explained.

It was the last nostalgia: that he
Should understand. That he might suffer or that
He might die was the innocence of living, if life
Itself was innocent. (283)

Explaining reality, reducing lived experience to a description or a narrative that the mind can contain, protects the man from certain facets of suffering—especially when that narrative nostalgically describes an innocent world. Nostalgia is a longing for the past, but, beyond that, it is a longing for a past that never was, for, for instance, a reality simple enough to be explained

and a totally innocent life. I have already discussed one way that imagining the deaths inside the World Trade Center as innocent or merely natural adds violence on violence by denying the very human evil that motivated and performed the attacks. Any memorial to the World Trade Center faces another nostalgic story of innocence that threatens memory with similar ethical violence. Žižek calls it a double blackmail:

If we simply, only and unconditionally condemn it [the terrorist attack], we simply appear to endorse the blatantly ideological position of American innocence under attack by Third World Evil; if we draw attention to the deeper sociopolitical causes of Arab extremism, we simply appear to blame the victim which ultimately got what it deserved. . . . The only possible solution here is to reject this very opposition and to adopt both positions simultaneously. (50; ellipsis in original)

The emotional appeal of the first temptation—asserting American innocence—is fairly obvious: we suffer much less psychological pain as innocent victims of someone else's depravity than if we find ourselves indicted as accomplices by our own actions. The opposite temptation—claiming to understand the causes behind the attacks—offers two possible consolations: first, if the circumstances are understandable, then we can understand how to keep this from ever happening again; second, the more disturbing turn, if the attacks were motivated by understandable grievances, then perhaps the victims were not innocent and the attack was much less evil than we first thought.

Žižek rightly recognizes that both of these temptations lead to ethically unacceptable positions, and the answer cannot lie in a middle ground between the two: "The moment we think in terms of 'Yes, the WTC collapse was a tragedy, but we should not fully solidarize with the victims, since this would mean supporting US imperialism', the ethical catastrophe is already here" (51). Any "mathematics of guilt" employed to balance understanding with empathy "misses the key point: the terrifying death of each individual is absolute and incomparable" (Žižek 51–52). The poet and her memorial stand before the collapse of the Twin Towers with an inescapable and inconceivable responsibility to each individual victim in his or her absolute particularity. She must remember without reducing the unique, incomparable, and irreplaceable person to a statistical "one among many" or effacing the significance of when and how each died. We all stand charged with this impossible task. The poet also faces those of us who live on and need to remember. Her memorial must help us faithfully commemorate the event called September 11, 2001, without escaping into intellectual evasion or emotional dishonesty. At the same time, the poet's role remains helping people to live their lives—lives that must be lived today, in the changing demands and lived reality of the present.

In "Henry James @ Ground Zero: Remembering the Future," Beverly Haviland comments that deciding how to commemorate the World Trade Center "is as complex a fate as anyone would want to endure. But the task is not a new one. However unique the events that require it, there are many sources from the past that can help us work through these issues" (285). Her past sources include insights from Henry James as well as a number of existing memorials that serve as exemplars of both failed and successful commemoration. Stevens' prescription for the poet—"that his function is to make his imagination theirs and that he fulfills himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others" (660–61)—augments her remarkable analysis of effective public memorials.

In her essay, Haviland turns to Henry James's treatment of New York City's Civil War memorials (found in *The American Scene*) in order to address the problem of appropriately commemorating Ground Zero. Haviland extracts and applies two criteria from James's descriptions of General Sherman's monument in Grand Army Plaza and the tomb of Ulysses S. Grant: a memorial must "have 'a clean, clear meaning' and at the same time . . . place itself 'outside articulate criticism' " (287). These two apparently contradictory criteria coalesce in Grant's tomb and form a complex experience "in which meaning is clear and yet beyond a certain kind of articulation" (287)—an experience that structurally resembles Kertzer's Levinasian approach to aesthetic and ethical singularity. Before examining James's example of a successful memorial, we should, with James, examine the Sherman monument as an instructive failure.

The Sherman memorial fails either to have a clean, clear meaning or to place itself beyond articulate criticism. James associates this failure with a particular type of ambiguity: "The image of Sherman that is represented here is 'double' in the sense that it is duplicitous: it attempts to substitute one claim for another that is concealed" (Haviland 286). The Augustus Saint-Gaudens statue portrays Sherman, the General of the bloody march to the sea, on horseback preceded by an olive-bearing messenger of peace. James recoils from the attempt, "however glittering and golden, to confound destroyers with benefactors" (James 173). Peace was a long way round from Sherman the destroyer, "and blood and ashes in between" (James 173). The monument's ambiguity, Haviland notes, does not prevent it from being didactic, and its meaning, though obscurely doubled, remains fixed and well within the limits of articulate criticism. The statue depicts Sherman both as soldier and as harbinger of peace, but it cannot accept challenges to its interpretation of the man and his deeds—challenges such as James's critique that the statue elides the horror of Sherman's campaign. The monument's duplicitous meaning is closed to alternate interpretations of Sherman. The monument, Haviland points out, is closed both symbolically and materially/spatially: when "Looking at the Sherman, one has no choice but to be a passive spectator" (290). The Sherman monument offers a didactic spectacle rather than a memorial to the general or his bloody march.

The newly constructed *USS New York* presents a similarly spectacular failure as a memorial. The San Antonio class LPD 21—an amphibious transport dock ship “used to transport and land Marines, their equipment and supplies by embarked air cushion or conventional landing craft or Expeditionary Fighting Vehicles” (“USS San Antonio [LPD 17]”)—was named, at the request of then Governor George Pataki, as a way of memorializing the victims of September 11, 2001, and steel salvaged from the wreckage of the Twin Towers was melted down and incorporated in the bow stem of the *New York*. The symbolism of the ship’s name and bow, like that of the Sherman monument, fails as a memorial by insisting on a single and at the same time duplicitous interpretation of the event it remembers. In a September 2002 naming ceremony, Pataki offered this explanation for his request: “The *USS New York* will ensure that all New Yorkers and the world will never forget the evil attacks of September 11, and the courage and compassion New Yorkers showed in response to terror” (“LPD 21 New York”). Pataki unambiguously lays claim to the first temptation delineated by Žižek: he takes a position of American innocence, courage, and compassion under attack by evil—a position that denies the geopolitical background of the attacks—but he attaches this meaning to a vessel (literally) of American military power. As then Secretary of the Navy Gordon England declared at the same ceremony, “This new class of ships will project American power to the far corners of the Earth and support the cause of freedom well into the 21st century” (“LPD 21 New York”). Borrowing James’s phrase about the Saint-Gaudens monument, the conflation of memorial and warship “confounds destroyers with benefactors” (173) and acts, borrowing Žižek’s words, “as if what causes resentment against the USA is not its excess of power, but its lack of it” (49). This conscription of the towers portrays the destruction of the World Trade Center as a simple problem with an even simpler solution. It elicits and exploits martial and nationalistic sentiment, but this projection of American power does not memorialize the victims of September 11 or help us to live in the wake of the Twin Towers’ collapse.

In opposition to the Saint-Gaudens Sherman, Haviland offers James’s description of Grant’s mausoleum. Grant’s tomb is as open as the Sherman statue is closed. Spatially, the monument is open to all visitors, and “without those visitors enacting their sense of belonging by being at their ease the monument would not work as a commemorative place” (Haviland 288). Rather than offer a spectacle, Grant’s memorial provides a space for commemoration, an activity that Haviland reminds us is remembering together (co-memoration). The work has shifted from the explanatory or conciliatory effect performed by the memorial’s aesthetic presentation to a work facilitated by the memorial but acted out by the individual visitors to the site: “What James registers in his impression is that it is not the monument as an aesthetic experience that makes memorialization work but rather the collective use of the space as a place that connects the past to the present by its lived experience” (Haviland 288).

Haviland applies Edward S. Casey's work on commemoration to the Grant mausoleum. For Casey, memorabilia (monuments, rituals, texts, etc.) that declare too explicit a meaning lose their value for commemorative purposes: "it becomes more like a simple reminder with only one reference" (289). Following Casey, Haviland argues that memorials must leave "remainders" in excess of the meaning they directly transmit. It is worth noting, as Kertzer does, that both Levinas and Stevens depict the impossibility of expressing the particular in language "not as poverty but as excess" (Kertzer 228). The ethical is not inexpressible because it fails to reach the minimal limit of expression; on the contrary, the ethical moment precedes and exceeds both expression and thought. The particle signifies an excessiveness about which language has nothing to say because it can say nothing satisfactory. The Grant memorial's symbolically open, excessive remainder allows visitors to find new meanings in the ritual activity accommodated by its material openness. This connection leads Haviland to "two aspects of the successful memorial: that it be, first, suggestive of multiple associations and, second, available for collective use" (289). A successful memorial turns spectators (those who observe a spectacle) into participants in the ritual activity of commemoration, and it allows these rituals to change over time. Commemoration is always a work-in-progress.

Haviland connects John J. Duncan's successful design of the Grant mausoleum with Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Grant's tomb, with its democratic openness, minimalist texts, and classicist architecture, offers its visitors an abstract experience that, like Lin's design, compels viewers to accept "that there might be many different meanings for the same phenomenon" (292). Holding open the question of meaning in turn "keeps them open to new uses created by those who need to commemorate" (292). They do not give us a comforting explanation; they do not end our confusion. They do provide us with the conditions necessary for commemoration. In Stevens' language, they find what will suffice.

The poetic memorial must be abstract. The ideal memorial of Haviland's Jamesian description gives us at least two reasons for this necessity. First, it must be abstract because it must facilitate the work-in-progress of commemoration. If a memorial does not change, it will become, like Verrocchio's equestrian statue in Stevens' discussion of Colleoni in Venice, merely "a bit of uncommon panache, no longer quite the appropriate thing outdoors" (647). Stevens uses the Verrocchio as an example of an imaginative work that, in the past, could perform its necessary task (could help people to live their lives) but is no longer capable of exciting the imagination in our defense. Stevens names this capability "nobility," and the success of a poetic memorial is measured by its strength of nobility, but a noble work that does not change "seems false and dead and ugly. To look at it at all makes us realize sharply that in our present, in the presence of our reality, the past looks false and is, therefore, dead and is, therefore, ugly" (665). The need for nobility does not change, but its manifestations must: "as a wave is a

force and not the water of which it is composed, which is never the same, so nobility is a force and not the manifestations of which it is composed, which are never the same" (665). The poetic memorial cannot merely repeat the form of already existing memorials: as a thing of the past it would be stillborn and powerless. A memorial for the Twin Towers must depart not only from the outmoded presentation of the Verrocchio but also from the beneficial models of the Grant mausoleum and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The needs of today are not those that faced Duncan or Lin, and today's memorial must speak to the needs of the present.

Stevens' poem "Of Modern Poetry" dramatizes both the changing face of reality and the need for an abstract, responsive poetry:

Then the theatre was changed
To something else. Its past was a souvenir.

It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.
It has to face the men of the time and to meet
The women of the time. It has to think about war
And it has to find what will suffice. It has
To construct a new stage. (218–19)

The poem, and the poetic memorial, must be responsive to its particular time and place. It cannot repeat what has been done or said in the past or expect to offer the last and final word. The poetic memorial must change if it is going to find what will suffice. It also must be open to the changing interpretations of those who use it for commemoration; the open and abstract can suffice in ways that the closed and didactic never will. It must embody a change from past forms and welcome change in the ways it helps people find what will suffice.

Since finding what will suffice cannot mean comforting or explaining, what does it mean? Nobility, the force that the imagination raises in our defense, is what will suffice: "It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems, in the last analysis, to have something to do with our self-preservation; and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives" (665). This force that has something to do with our self-preservation works through the *sound* of words—not their comforting or explanatory meanings, but their *sound*. As Stevens says earlier in "The Nobel Rider and the Sound of Words," "above everything else, poetry is words; and that words, above everything else, are, in poetry, sounds" (663). "Of Modern Poetry" envisions the poem as an actor inhabiting its newly constructed stage, and on that stage it must

speak words that in the ear,
In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat,

Exactly, that which it wants to hear, at the sound
Of which, an invisible audience listens,
Not to the play, but to itself, expressed
In an emotion as of two people, as of two

Emotions becoming one. (219)

The audience does not listen to the poem-actor; it listens to itself, but it listens to itself only at the sound of the poem's words. The poem-actor is "a metaphysician in the dark, twanging / An instrument, twanging a wiry string" (219) that resonates through the audience that listens to the sympathetic vibrations that sound within itself—like two people or emotions becoming one.

The indirect action described in "Of Modern Poetry" could never communicate a concrete message to its audience in order to end their confusion or dry their tears, but it does explain how it is possible for the poet "to make his imagination theirs"; "he fulfills himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others" (660–61). The poet cannot help people to live their lives by giving them the answers or speaking comforting words: neither of those roles would help anyone. The poet helps people to live by exciting in their imaginations the force of nobility, "a violence *from within* that protects us" (emphasis added): the force of nobility must come from within. The poet cannot give us nobility, but she can create, through the abstract resonance of her poem, the necessary conditions for the work of commemoration. To help people to live, a poetic memorial must excite nobility and hold open the space of commemoration. It cannot designate a single, predetermined meaning; therefore, it must be abstract.

The help that an abstract memorial for the World Trade Center offers to those of us who remain and remember cannot be what common parlance calls "closure." For most of us in this country and around the world, for everyone who was not in the immediate vicinity of Manhattan on September 11, the event we experienced on that clear, terrible morning was an image. There is, for us, no experience of the event behind the image; the image itself (the set of images that presented the towers' collapse) was the event. Beginning with the television coverage that broadcast, live, the crash of United Airlines Flight 175, the terrorist attacks spread their visual presence through the numerous media forms that carried the event across the country. The multiplied images were replayed on television, printed in newspapers and magazines, collected into photography exhibitions, circulated on the Internet, and drawn into cartoon strips and graphic novels. In an event that was at its inception obsessively repeated, the crash of Flight 175 into the South Tower at 9:03 A.M. stands out as a supreme moment of repetition. One explanation is that 9:03 was the moment when we suddenly realized we were watching a terrorist attack. We could, at first, believe that Flight 11 was a terrible accident, but the second plane hitting the second

tower removed that possibility. At 9:02, we were watching the spectacle of a freak accident; at 9:03 we felt the danger of our technology used as a weapon against us. This points to another reason that 9:03 holds such a prominent place in our collective memory. At 9:03 we were watching. We saw the second plane enter the screen and, before we could process its unexpected arrival, we watched it disappear into the side of the South Tower. We return to this instant as the original moment of trauma, and our traumatic repetition appears on the covers of magazines, newspapers, and websites. The traumatic repetition of this exact moment performs an attempted return to the original event, to the site of injury, or even to the innocence of the previous moment.

Such traumatic repetition stands in contrast to a repetition that, like the repetition in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," comprises "An occupation, an exercise, a work, / A thing final in itself and, therefore, good" (405). A memorial does not—must not, cannot—offer "closure" to the repetition of trauma, a final end to going around and around. Instead, a memorial replaces the empty repetition of trauma with the work of commemoration, a work that is and must always be itself a repetition. A false memorial, a closed didactic structure offering finally to explain and finish the event, does not allow change and so does not facilitate repetition and cannot replace traumatic repetition. The abstract memorial, on the other hand, allows commemoration to be a going "round and round" that is final in itself and therefore good. Perhaps the poetic memorial, like Stevens' man-hero, "is not the exceptional monster, / But he that of repetition is most master" (350). It is a (commemorative) repetition from within that protects us from a (traumatic) repetition from without.

In the end, the ideal memorial shares the characteristics of Stevens' supreme fiction. A memorial must be abstract: otherwise it will, like Saint-Gaudens's Sherman, present a closed meaning that can neither gesture beyond its own interpretation of the excessively singular lives and events it memorializes (lives and events whose very particularity, Kertzer reminds us, evades and effaces every closed system of signification) nor support the always changing work of commemoration. Our memorials must change: otherwise they will at the moment of their completion be outdated spectacles incapable of responding to the needs of the moment. It must give pleasure: here we must be careful. Bates warns that our responses to tragedy can quickly fall prey to an escapist pastoralism and become "self-indulgent, derivative, or even dishonest" (180), denying the complexity of life and suffering. The pleasure of a memorial cannot be the pleasure of comprehensive understanding (an idea that fully contains the event) any more than it can be the pleasure of disingenuously escaping the experience of pain. It must be found in something like Stevens' elusive idea of shifting nobility. To memorialize the World Trade Center, to "give memory, tenderness and meaning to all that howling space" (DeLillo), a poem must point toward a moment that exceeds the narrative of past and future without losing intelligible memory; it must point

toward a tenderness that consoles without covering over the suffering of a single victim on the planes or in the towers; it must point toward a meaning that exceeds its own understanding of that terrible, nameless morning. The poem, whether made of words, of stone, or from salvaged steel beams, must do the impossible to help us to live our lives.

I will refrain in this essay from commenting on *Reflecting Absence*, the Michael Arad and Peter Walker design for the memorial at the World Trade Center site, other than to note favorably that the design, by placing reflecting pools in the footprints of Towers One and Two, leaves the physical space once filled by the towers empty, and by retaining what DeLillo calls “all that howling space,” the design makes it possible, makes it necessary as far as that is possible, for each visitor to confront and respond to that space, to the absent persistence of those two buildings and all they metonymically represent. The significant emptiness requires an individual response from each individual visitor each time they return to reflect. Requiring visitors to construct the details of their own response rather than providing them with a ready meaning risks the chance that they will generate narratives that we would not endorse, but that risk is vitally necessary to the possibility of commemoration.

Further analysis of the memorial in Manhattan is of course possible and possibly necessary, but the act of commemorating the events of September 11, 2001, of offering what the late Jean Baudrillard called a requiem for the Twin Towers, will not be limited to construction on the island. Like the attack itself, memorials for September 11 are multiplied across the country and the world in the form of traditional monuments, Internet sites, poems, photographs, editorial cartoons, films, essays, and, in some cases, programs on the same televisions that presented the towers’ destruction. Because the impact of the World Trade Center collapse extends far beyond New York City, these mundane memorials will play a more central role than the official monument in the everyday responses of most Americans. We need successful memorials for commemoration at the imaginative site of memory, memorials that respond from within to an event that broke in on our everyday ways of being and must be met at those experiential sites. It is here, in the needs of day to day life, that we have the most to gain from reading Wallace Stevens; it is here especially that his poetry can help us to live our lives. Bates ends his essay,

Given another chance at choosing a poem for my literature class to ponder in the days immediately after the attacks of September 11, I would still pass over “Esthétique du Mal” for Eliot’s “Little Gidding” or a poem by Yeats or Auden. With every day that passes, however, I believe that we are better disposed to benefit from Stevens’ insights into human pain. (180)

As we continue the work of commemoration, the aporetic task of remembering and responding to an event that exceeds our capacities for understanding and empathy, Stevens' insights are indispensable. They have, at the end, something to do with our self-preservation.

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Notes

¹Wallace Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 661. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with page number(s) only in parentheses.

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Wallace Stevens: "The Doctor of Geneva"

CLIVE WATKINS

I

OFTEN REFERRED TO but seldom discussed, "The Doctor of Geneva"¹ is a gem, a bravura display in miniature of Wallace Stevens' poetic skills—his rhetorical, allusive, formal, and metrical sophistication, and his comic brio, too. Perhaps its relative neglect springs from the ease with which it can be enlisted into arguments about the broader import of his verse,² but although in what follows I consider the various meanings of the words from which Stevens fashioned his poem, questions of a wider sort—whether and how it addresses philosophical or theological issues—interest me hardly at all. In short, I am more concerned with Stevens as a *maker* than with Stevens as a thinker. The spirit of my approach is perhaps suggested by Mallarmé's well-known remark to Degas, as reported by Valéry: "one does not make poetry with ideas, but with *words*" (63). There is, as well, Valéry's comment on his own poem "Le cimetière marin": "if anyone wonders . . . what I 'wanted to say' in a certain poem, I reply that I did not *want to say* but *wanted to make*, and that it was the intention of *making* which *wanted* what I *said*" (147–48). I might put it like this: if "The Doctor of Geneva" "means" anything, what it means is the complex and aesthetically satisfying patterns Stevens has created. My essay, then, examines the heap of earlier materials out of which the poem grew and goes on to trace some of the rich verbal patterns to be found in its fifteen lines.

II

In his journal for August 24, 1902, Stevens recorded a visit to Long Beach, N.Y., confessing, "I am not at home by the sea; my fancy is not at all marine, so to speak" (L 59). Despite this confession, the idea of the sea haunted him, and its sounds echo through his poems from the Harvard period on.³ The earliest of his poems with a marine setting is the sonnet "I strode along my beaches like a sea," which appears in his notebook for February 22, 1898, and was published later the same year in *The Harvard Advocate*. Already present are two elements that will form part of the configuration of "The Doctor of Geneva" twenty-three years later—the shoreline

location, with the sand stretching before him “firm and fair” (482), and the speaker’s attempt to reconcile his conflicting feelings as they are projected onto the outward scene: his “long step” is “gloriously free” and yet he feels “a deep despair.” Stevens envisages himself standing not just at the boundary of sea and land but also—it is a dimension that will shape his subsequent treatment of the motif—between heaven and earth: for “in the sky a silent cloud was blent / With dreams of my soul’s stillness; and the sand, / That had been naught to me, now trembled far / In mystery beneath the evening star” (482). The emotional posture here is no doubt indebted to the Coleridge of “Dejection,” his ode on the failure of the “shaping spirit of Imagination” (366), in which he declared of the moon and stars, “I see, not feel, how beautiful they are” (364).

Stevens’ August 24, 1902, journal-entry continues as follows:

when I sit on the shore and listen to the waves they only suggest wind in treetops. A single coup d’oeil is enough to see all, as a rule. The sea is loveliest far in the abstract when the imagination can feed upon the idea of it. The thing itself is dirty, wobbly and wet. But to-day, while all that I have just said was as true as ever, towards evening I saw lights on heaven and earth that never were seen before. The white beach (covered with beach-fleas etc.) ran along behind and before me. The declining sun threw my shadow a frightful length on the sand. The clouds began to become confused and dissolve into a golden mist into which the sea ran purple, blue, violet. The sun went down lighting the underworld and gilding a few clouds in this one. The West filled with a blue city of mist etc. Turning to the East I saw that a storm was creeping up, and suddenly then I caught sight of two rainbows swinging down. Walking over the beach under this lowering sky was like stepping into a cavern. Two women—one dressed in yellow, one in purple moving along the white sand—relieved the severity of the prospect. (L 59)

Here once again are elements that will reappear in the 1921 poem—a figure at a shoreline struggling to comprehend the ocean’s ambiguous meaning. Is it merely “dirty, wobbly and wet” or is some other interpretation attainable? In the strange celestial lights, we can see a reflex of the 1898 sonnet; but other elements accrue—the “city of mist,” the whiteness of the sand,⁴ the two female figures—elements that, as Stevens reworks the pattern in later journal-entries and poems, will shift in imaginative salience.

We have no independent view of Long Beach on this occasion, no possibility of comparing Stevens’ late-afternoon stroll with the experience of another observer, but, as Stevens reports it, life imitated art. The coincidence is commonplace. In any experience memories of earlier experiences mingle, both our own and what we understand of the experiences of oth-

ers as we have learned of these directly and indirectly—for example, from books and pictures. This process is not just a matter of interpretation, of extracting meaning from perceptions; it influences also what perceptions we have access to, as the history of the “picturesque” demonstrates. In this passage, we can see the twenty-three-year-old Stevens encountering this issue and responding by indirections familiar in his writing at all periods. Despite an initial impulse to turn aside from sense data he finds unpleasing to more abstract contemplations, he is drawn into a process that, beginning as a renewed effort to describe objectively what lies before him (“to-day . . . towards evening I saw”), transforms those sense data through metaphor into an imaginative construct: in effect, into a further abstraction. That Stevens is aware of the conflicts inherent in these shifts (“But to-day, while all that I have just said was as true as ever”) adds a reflexive turn to the exercise. The result dissolves perception into aesthetic affect. The “declining sun,” which throws Stevens’ shadow “a frightful length on the sand,” is lightly personified; the metaphors latent in Stevens’ description of the clouds suggest the wet-in-wet techniques of the water-colorist; the setting sun lights “the underworld . . . gilding a few clouds,” as if what Stevens were looking at were a theater set. At the close of the passage, his eye falls upon the two women, happily placed to relieve “the severity of the prospect.” Long Beach turns into the picture of itself.

Writing in his journal three years later, on April 30, 1905, Stevens admits to a “loathing (large + vague!), for things as they are,” and he adds, in a subsequent entry of the same date, “If I were to have my will I should live with many spirits, wandering by ‘caverns measureless to man, / Down to a sunless sea’ ” (L 82). The image-cluster has been reconfigured, pared down to its essential locale and its core personnel, removed from actual sense data and has become a vehicle for fantasy. The handling is now explicitly literary. In 1902, the “lowering sky” resembled a “cavern”; here the image becomes a full-blown quotation—from Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan.” The two women walking the Long Beach sand, anonymous and viewed from a distance, are re-imagined as a host of “spirits,” first among whom are two queens, Mary Stuart and Marie Antoinette, romantic heroines from history and literature, with whom Stevens imagines himself conversing. (In an entry three days before, Stevens had referred to Elsie Moll as “une vraie princesse lointaine” [L 82].) The remainder of the list comprises writers and philosophers—George Sand, Carlyle, Lincoln, Plato, Hawthorne, Goethe “and the like,” the passage collapsing in self-conscious ennui with Stevens’ remark that he is “too languid even to name them” (L 82).

Almost exactly one year later, in an entry for April 27, 1906, Stevens picks up these elements, modifying them further:

Clear sky. The twilight subtly mediaeval—pre-Copernican. A few nights ago I saw the rim of the moon, and the whole black moon behind, just visible. The larger stars were like flares. One

would have liked to walk about with some Queen discussing waves and caverns, like a noble warrior speaking of trifles to a noble lady. The imagination is quite satisfied with definite objects, if they be lofty and beautiful enough. It is chiefly in dingy attics that one dreams of violet cities—and so on. So if I had had that noble lady, I should have been content. The absence of her made the stealthy shadows dingy, attic—*incomplete*. (L 91)

As in the 1902 entry, reporting (“Clear sky”) gives way to transformation: the twilight is “subtly mediaeval—pre-Copernican.” Stevens’ moon (recalled from a few days earlier) evokes the moon that gleams in the lines Coleridge took from “The Ballad of Sir Patrick Spens” as epigraph for “Dejection”: “Late, late yestreen I saw the new Moon, / With the old Moon in her arms” (362).⁵ The two queens, who in 1905 had headed Stevens’ list of “spirits,” are condensed into the vague and more portentous “some Queen.” The “caverns” and “sunless sea,” quoted in 1905 from “Kubla Khan” and there the imagined scene for Stevens’ rendezvous with his company of “spirits,” become in 1906, as “waves and caverns,” the topics of his dreamed-of discussions. Finally, the “violet cities” are a re-imagining of the “blue city of mist” that filled the sunset sky in his 1902 account of Long Beach.

Like the earlier entries, this, too, is marked by indirections. The “twilight [is] *subtly mediaeval*” (italics added), a discrimination that, although offering itself as precise, is in fact elusive. Introducing his conversations “with a noble lady,” Stevens shifts from the indicative mood and the first person (“A few nights ago I saw”) to the optative and the impersonal third (“One would have liked”), a shift that has the effect of distancing him from his own imagining. This distancing is confirmed in the quasi-apothegmatic manner of the next two sentences. When his attention turns back to the imaginary conversation, Stevens reverts to the first person, but the persistence of the optative allows a more direct expression of his unhappy feelings at the gap between fantasy and reality.

Between 1919 and the publication of *Harmonium* in 1923, Stevens published seventeen poems that bear some trace of this evolving image cluster.⁶ This was, of course, the period of the composition of the two Crispin poems, which extensively explored the imaginative modalities of sea and land. These modalities provide the organizing principle of “In the Clear Season of Grapes,” in which the “gross blue under rolling bronzes / Belittles” the “carefully chosen daubs” of the “house / And the table that holds a platter of pears, / Vermilion smeared over green, arranged for show” (92). Section IX of “New England Verses,” “*Statue against a Clear Sky*,” places the elements of sea and land in opposition—“Ashen man on ashen cliff above the salt halloo, / O ashen admiral of the hale, hard blue. . . .,” a setup closely resembling that in “The Doctor of Geneva.” In “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon,” the unstable relationship between self and scene becomes the focus of the entire poem, as sunset and the tide sweep

through a speaker who declares himself "the compass of that sea," and, in an echo of Stevens' own shoreline perambulations, "the world in which [he] walked" (51). In a further group, the focus shifts to the female figure, now ambiguously eroticized. (She is missing from "The Doctor of Geneva" but will reappear years later in "The Idea of Order at Key West.") The eponymous "Infanta Marina" (i.e., "princess") is the imaginative descendant of Mary Stuart and Marie Antoinette and of the "Queen" of his 1906 journal entry. In "O, Florida, Venereal Soil," in which Stevens rewrites his yearning amid the dingy incompleteness of his 1906 life, the "Virgin of boorish births" is associated with "The dreadful sundry of this world" and comes "Lasciviously as the wind . . . tormenting, / Insatiable," when she might instead have sat in regal and unapproachable isolation, "A scholar of darkness, / Sequestered over the sea, / Wearing a clear tiara / Of red and blue and red" (38–39). "The Doctor of Geneva" is not the least in this set of poems of the shoreline, but it draws into its gravitational field other charged particles—images and ideas—whose antecedents also appear in Stevens' earlier writings.

III

Stevens' protagonist is a doctor, a learned person, a teacher, someone skilled in a specific area of knowledge, and, although other kinds of knowledge will emerge as important for the poem, the immediately relevant sense, as suggested by the title, is of one proficient in the teachings of Calvinism. Indeed, Joan Richardson suggests that "the doctor is, on one level, the embodiment of Dr. John Calvin of Geneva" (120)—although in fact his stovepipe hat places him firmly within the world of nineteenth-century America and makes it clear that, as Richardson implies, no single ascription will do.⁷

Of the provenance of the doctor's hat there is more to say. In a letter to Elsie Moll, dated January 10, 1909, Stevens conducts what amounts to an unwitting rehearsal for "The Doctor of Geneva," exploring a range of topics that re-appear either explicitly or sub-textually in the poem: the destruction of great cities, the provincial remoteness of America from European centers of culture, and specifically from France, the role of church bells in establishing a sense of the sacred. Since it is unlikely that, in writing "The Doctor of Geneva," Stevens was able to refer to the letter, the coincidence of letter and poem is remarkable and suggestive of the way his writing fed upon itself.

As he writes, it is Sunday morning. Stevens is musing, in an associative manner that foreshadows the circling appositions of his mature poetic style, on the difference between "the thought of motions long ago and the thought of sound long ago" (*L* 117). Aware of the power of sound to command his imagination (as it will in "The Doctor of Geneva"), Stevens brings to mind the siege of Rome "simply as motion, without sound": "The trenches are dug, the guns are brought up, the regiments manouevre, the walls tumble.

It is all visionary. . . . The walls fall down mutely as all things happen in times far off. —But let sound enter—the hum of the men, the roar of the guns, the thunder of collapsing walls. The scene has its shock” (L 117).

Stevens turns from this image to “Another sensation,” a painting he had viewed the previous day that had been exhibited also in Paris: “By looking at that, and at nothing else I could imagine myself in Paris, seeing just what any Parisian would see—I laughed in my sleeve at New-York, far out on the bleak edge of the world” (L 117). His private scorn at what he regards as the provincial isolation of America and the need this betrays to convince himself (and Elsie) that he belongs to the cultural elite represented for him by France echo the fancy expressed in his journal entry of April 30, 1905, of walking the shore in the company of Mary Stuart (who was raised in France) and Marie Antoinette. They prefigure the more complex condescension found in “The Doctor of Geneva.”

The picture itself was “a sunset from the roof of an Oriental house” (that is, a westward view like that in “The Doctor of Geneva”), “so full of burning light, that it looked like a city drowned in the Red Sea, perceived through placid water.” The image of the city drowned by the sea, whose ruin was perhaps associated in Stevens’ imagination with the ruined city of Rome to which he has just referred, conflates three biblical stories, two of them directly relevant to his later poem—the Flood, the laying waste of the cities of the unrighteous, and the drowning of the Egyptian army as it pursued the fleeing Israelites.

“By long usage,” continues Stevens, “we have become accustomed to bells turning this ordinary day into a holy one. The general absence of that familiar ringing here makes the day half a waste.” He adds sardonically, “Toll the pious forth—saintly Belinda in modified Directoire and honest John in his stove-pipe” (L 117).⁸ The commonness of the name “John” makes speculation dangerous, but given that “honest John” and the doctor share the same taste in hats, and given, too, the presence in Stevens’ family of several Johns, notably his maternal grandfather, John Zeller, “a country boy who must have spoken Pennsylvania Dutch” (L 417) and whose portrait hung in Stevens’ boyhood home (L 399), it may be that behind the 1921 poem lies, not just John Calvin, but the veiled presence of Stevens’ pious ancestor. Certainly, he figures in several later poems. More generally, it appears that members of the preceding generations of Stevens’ family served as a focus for his sometimes critical attitude toward his Protestant upbringing.

As early as 1896, in a high-spirited letter to his mother, the young Stevens makes fun of his Uncle Isaac Bennet, his father’s sister’s husband, a “Puritan who revels in catechisms and creeds, a hand-to-mouth man, earnest, determined, discreet” (L 9). In his earliest New York years, Stevens was a frequenter of St. Patrick’s Cathedral, and his own inclination was toward worship as a species of aesthetic experience. Visiting Christ Church one evening in 1906, he enjoyed the “Full litany—sweet and melodious and

welcome," but wanted to go further: "One should have a great nave, quiet lights, a remote voice, a soft choir and solitude" (L 86). He preferred "temples full of sacred images, full of the air of love and holiness" and expressed disappointment at the lack of symbols of the life of Jesus in the Chapel of St. John (L 140). Thirty-five years later, in 1944, similar sentiments occur. The Zeller family, he notes, "seems to have been both poor and pious" (L 470). In 1946, apropos of a cartouche over the door of the Zeller house intended "to indicate that the house and the people that lived in it were consecrated to the glory of God," he remarks, no doubt with a touch of jocularity, "These people, whatever else they were, were fanatics" (L 534). Stevens' 1909 letter shows the same two-edged response, thankfulness for the "grace" by which the local church celebrates the Sabbath by ringing its bells, followed by whimsical condescension toward "saintly Belinda" and "honest John" in their antiquated Sunday best. Stevens' mingled admiration for the piety of such figures and his rejection of what he sees as their conventional and dogmatic narrowness anticipate the criticism leveled at the doctor of Geneva as he stands gazing out at the ocean.

IV

The particular shore on which Stevens placed his protagonist marks the western edge of North America, and this is of course significant, for much of the poem's comic point would have been retained had Stevens placed his doctor instead before a different but equally turbulent ocean at Crispin's starting point on the Bay of Biscay ("Bordeaux to Yucatan" [23]). Stevens' own fascination with "the westwardness of things" (L 618) is well known, but this private association lies in a matrix of public meanings. "Westward the course of empire takes its way," wrote Bishop Berkeley in the eighteenth century in his "Verses on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America," and he expressed contempt for a Europe he characterized as in "decay" (Smith 220). This is the impulse underlying Emerson's complaint in "The American Scholar": "We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe. The spirit of the American freeman is already suspected to be timid, imitative, tame" (*Essays* 70). Alongside Emerson's complaint, however, ran another impulse, the belief that once, in some primal scene, nature and man had existed in direct and unmediated relationship, a relationship lost but perhaps capable of recovery. "The foregoing generations," Emerson writes in the opening paragraph of *Nature*, "beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?" (*Essays* 7). At the close of section 4, he writes that those living "in harmony with nature" will be able to "understand her text. . . . [T]he world shall be to us an open book, and every form significant of its hidden life and final cause" (*Essays* 25).

Stevens inherited these twin myths—the dream of the “westwardness” of American culture and the dream of a homologous relationship with the nonhuman universe—but they remained paradoxical, simultaneously expressive of a desire to believe in the possibility of a genuinely American imagination, capable of responding directly to the natural world, and of a countervailing nostalgia for a Europe still felt as ineluctably ancestral. Thus, “Sunday Morning,” in which eastward journeying is seen as retrograde toward a Christianity whose rejection the poem explores, presents at its close an evening view, in which man’s relationship with nature is finally uncertain. The beauty of Stevens’ images does not disguise the fact that these twin myths remain unreconciled. Indeed, the poignancy of the images springs in some measure from an awareness of that failure. The deer that walk upon “our mountains” are the wild inhabitants of a territory over which, despite their prior occupation, we claim civilizing dominion. The cries of the quail are “spontaneous” and, except for their being overheard by the poet, form no part of any human discourse. The undulations of the pigeons’ flight are “ambiguous” and prognosticate with certainty nothing of relevance to humankind. “The Doctor of Geneva,” in the mockery directed at its protagonist for his unresponding silence before the ocean’s untamed wildness, is in part an expression of this paradox.

The doctor, then, is comically fearful for his own safety. The nature of his fear supplies the poem’s dominant configuration, a dialectic of containment and threatened eruption that operates—in theme, form, diction and meter—throughout the poem. This configuration is given in the first two lines: the doctor, to test its firmness, stamps the sand “That lay impounding the Pacific swell” (19). Stevens is delightfully exact. To “impound” is to “confine and store (water) in a reservoir,”⁹ the word being derived from “pound,” cognate with “pond,” a “body of still water, usually of artificial formation” and, especially, a “body of water held up or confined by a dam or the like” (*OED*). The initial insinuation is that the Pacific, held within its bounds, presents no threat. At the same time, by a witty misdirection (“-pounding” as “beating”), “impounding” hints that, in the words of Frost’s later poem on a similar subject, the waves were thinking of “doing something to the shore / That water never did to land before” (229). Indeed, though the sand in Stevens’ 1898 sonnet was “firm and fair,” sand is proverbially unstable. One recalls how the house of the foolish man built upon sand was swept away when “the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew” (Matt. 7.25), a sense suggested by the contrast between “lay” (subjection, passivity) and “swell” (dominance, enlargement).

Having tested its firmness, the doctor checks his own protection, but the properties with which his gestures are occupied—he pats his stovepipe hat (hint of a desire for warmth and for the security of an enclosed space?) and tugs his shawl (hint of a desire for womanly comfort?)—only make him appear more ridiculous. The poem has it both ways. If the ocean

presents no threat, then hats and shawls are hardly relevant; they are entirely irrelevant if the doctor really is in danger. In the sestet of another of his 1898 sonnets, "How sweet it is to find an asphodel," Stevens addresses an anonymous youth (a surrogate for himself, perhaps), "a pleasant flow'r, / A tall, fair figure in the sullen plain." In a monitory contrast to his fragile beauty, associated as it is with an inland scene, the concluding lines describe how at his feet "with undiminished pow'r / Roll the huge waters of an endless main" (488). Twenty-three years on, the doctor's case is more complex. The point is not just that he is physically afraid but rather that he is unsettled by the fact that the intellectual provenance that characterizes him is incommensurate to this new experience.

Stevens' thematic configuration of containment and eruption shows itself in his deft formal dispositions. Line 1 gives us our first view of the doctor as he looks out from the uncertain safety of the shore, and line 2 our first view of the ocean. The third line, turning back to the doctor, completes a bracketing pattern in which reference to the ocean's power in the inner line ("Pacific swell") is contained between outer lines that refer to possible defences against that power ("sand," "hat," "shawl"). The second tercet observes the same bracketing pattern, the threat of the ocean in the inner line ("such long-rolling opulent cataracts") being undercut by the outer lines. The insinuation in the fourth line that the doctor regards the ocean as launching a personal attack ("assailed") makes "cataracts" seem nothing more than an exaggeration arising from his pusillanimity, while the concessive simile in the sixth, by reducing the "cataracts" to a literary reference and implying that the doctor is thoroughly familiar with such rhetorical effects, likewise makes their danger seem insignificant. This sense of natural energies kept in check is reinforced by the fact that each tercet is coterminous with a single, complete sentence.

The diction of the first tercet is dominated by short words of mainly Germanic origin¹⁰ and in a tone where mockery is in some measure subdued in the interests of exposition. The arcane and Latinate epithet, "Lacustrine," with which the second tercet opens, picks up and translates the root meaning of "impounding" (pond/lake) and stereotypically assigns the doctor to a particular class of human beings (the doctor as lake-dweller as opposed to those who live by the sea), thereby initiating a move toward sarcasm.¹¹ A set of ironic distances opens up between the doctor, the speaker, and the reader. In these recessive planes of observation and narration, the rhetorical adjustments apparent in his 1902 journal entry (Stevens observing himself observing the sea, the beach, and the figures walking along it) and the indirections that characterize his 1906 entry (distancing himself from his own fantasy) grow more complex. Two shifts occur. The place in the motif occupied in 1902 by the anonymous female figures who shared Long Beach with Stevens has now been taken by the doctor. At the same time, Stevens' self-consciousness is displaced onto this new figure, who becomes an observed observer. This double shift sus-

pends the poem's various descriptions of the outward scene indeterminately in the interval between doctor and speaker.

Something of the evolution of this technique can be seen by comparing "The Doctor of Geneva" with two slightly earlier poems, "Blanche McCarthy" (1915) and "Meditation" (1917). In "Blanche McCarthy," the heroine is enjoined to turn from the "dead glass," which reflects "Only the surfaces," and, in a version of the doctor's scrutiny of the "multifarious heavens," to look instead "in the terrible mirror of the sky" (529). Despite the second-person address implicit in the imperative mood of its main verbs, we sense that Blanche McCarthy and the anonymous speaker are phases of the same person, that the poem is an act of self-communion. In the more languid "Meditation," these phases separate into distinct personae, the protagonist complaining to his "Prince" that "Neither sky nor earth / Express themselves before me" (537). But the Prince is a lay figure from whom no response is required, and although cast rhetorically as one side of a dialogue, "Meditation" is in effect, like "Blanche McCarthy," an act of self-communion. The structure of "The Doctor of Geneva" is altogether more resonant. Here, the ostensible protagonist, the doctor, will remain, like Blanche McCarthy, silent. Unlike her, and in contrast to the Prince in "Meditation," he is held at the distance of the third person and is never directly addressed. Indeed, to the extent that the poem is uttered by an impersonal narrator, it is we, as readers, who are addressed, invited to complicity in the sarcasm expended upon the doctor behind his back.¹²

The second tercet not only opens out the dialogical space of the poem, but it also introduces subtextually a new voice. The energies of the ocean have been represented as contained or held in place by the shore. Line 6 represents the rhetorical energies of Racine and Bossuet as contained within their literary works ("Unless Racine or Bossuet held the like"—italics added), so that "cataracts" serves as a double metaphor, indicating both the ocean's rolling waves and also the powerful and fluent language of those two writers. The comparison of speech to the movement of water is an ancient commonplace.¹³ It shapes Emerson's "Seashore" and Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" and appears in six of the marine poems Stevens wrote in the years leading up to *Harmonium*. This trope was clearly running in his mind during this period. Echoes can be heard in poems published in the group "Pecksniffiana" in the October 1919 issue of *Poetry*. For instance, the heroine of "The Paltry Nude Starts on a Spring Voyage" is "Eager for the . . . bellowing / Of the high interiors of the sea" (4); and in "The Place of the Solitaires" Stevens brings together sea and shore (in an effect reminiscent of the setting of "The Doctor of Geneva") and parallels the sound and motion of the waters and the motion of thought, "its restless iteration" (48). A slightly later poem, "Hibiscus on the Sleeping Shores," published in 1921 alongside "The Doctor of Geneva," refers to the "blather that the water made" (18). In "From the Journal of Crispin," written toward the end of 1921, some six or eight weeks

after the publication of "The Doctor of Geneva," Stevens deploys the trope extensively and within a poetic argument with clear affinities to that which underlies "The Doctor of Geneva." Crispin, a comic compendium of pretension, shallowness, and triviality, finds himself, like the doctor, "peering in sea-glass" and "washed away by magnitude." "Can Crispin stem verboseness in the sea . . . ?" asks the narrator, a "vocal thing," its "voice belched out of hoary darks" (985–86).

Retrospectively, the metaphors of lines 5 and 6 have a further effect, awakening senses latent within "swell,"¹⁴ for although in the context of the second line "swell" referred only to the undulating ocean, it, too, is an item from the lexicon of style.¹⁵ The effect springs in part from the symmetry of the first two tercets, both "swell" and "cataracts" occupying the final position in their respective lines. Moreover, the ocean's cataracts are "opulent," an epithet whose Latin cognates are recorded in figurative application to speech and books. (Its literal senses—"affluent," "Yielding great wealth" (*OED*)—give rise to a further transumption of "swell," suggesting perhaps that the waters of the Pacific are swollen with riches—e.g., plant and animal life—or, by metonymy, their value to commercial navigation.)

The combined effect of these metaphors is to present the ocean's "long-rolling opulent cataracts" as the utterance of an excelling orator.¹⁶ The trope involved is prosopopoeia, which Quintilian classifies with *dialogismos*, "since we cannot imagine a speech without imagining also a person to utter it" (Sonnino 54–55); and this is its effect here: the awakened oceanic voice invites us to grant it a provisional personhood. Walter Benjamin, in a discussion of Baudelaire, famously remarked, "To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return" (184), and he characterized Baudelaire's poetry as concerned with the "disintegration of the aura": "the expectation roused by the look of the human eye is not fulfilled" (185). This is the malady of unreciprocated attention suffered by the speaker in "Meditation," a malady that results in the frustration of inarticulacy and incoherence: "What is it that I think of, truly?" Here, however, it is not the failure of the Pacific to express itself—that is, to reciprocate the attention bestowed upon it—that silences the doctor, but rather its intimidating rhetorical fluency. Invested with the power of utterance, the ocean threatens the doctor's own personhood, and, by implication, that of the speaker, too.

As for Racine and Bossuet, those exemplars of rhetorical accomplishment, they serve as mere tokens for French literary culture, as if their names were enclosed within sanitizing quotation marks.¹⁷ This diminishment is partly a function of the different tropes involved, for, unlike prosopopoeia, the combination of metonymy and synecdoche by which their names enter the text does not require the attribution of personhood. What is more, the very power of utterance that defined them as writers is undermined by the dismissive analogy ("the like") through which they are introduced. Racine and Bossuet belong, not to the depths of the text but to its decep-

tively innocent surface, where they are the instruments of an argument in which, defined as they are (and as indeed the doctor is) by provenance, they serve as merely exemplary figures.

With the third tercet the final and longest section begins, a section in which the bracketing patterns of the first two tercets are dissolved, as if in imitation of the land's imagined collapse before the ocean. It opens with the shortest sentence in the entire poem—"He did not quail"—whose monosyllabic force draws attention to the doctor's composure and, initially at least, belies the ridicule to which he has been subjected. He "felt no awe," we are told, the noun encompassing not just the "Immediate and active fear" imputed to him in earlier lines but also aestheticized and religious senses—"solemn and reverential wonder, tinged with latent fear, inspired by what is terribly sublime and majestic in nature, e.g. thunder, a storm at sea" and "profound reverence in the presence of . . . mysterious sacredness" (*OED*). The innuendo is that "awe" is precisely what the doctor should have felt. Even his study of the "multifarious heavens," an engagement with the natural world that, so the reader might suppose, embraced domains wider and more remote than the Pacific, is undercut by the dry tone of "multifarious" and by "plumb"—"To sound . . . with a plummet; to measure (the depth) by sounding" (*OED*)—which tropes the heavens as an ocean.¹⁸

The doctor, however, although an active seeker after astronomical knowledge, is presented as the passive object of an external agent, for the Pacific "found means to set his simmering mind . . . Spinning and hissing." Furthermore, "Spinning and hissing" suggests that the doctor's mind (like Hoon's) has metaphorically taken on the attributes of the sea itself. Stevens' technical adroitness merits comment here, too. The sensation of busyness created by the proximity of three present participles ("simmering . . . Spinning . . . hissing") is underpinned by assonance, while the energies of the sea as they affect the doctor are given an initiatory force by the emphatic reversed foot at the start of line 11.

Stevens' technical skill is evident again in the placement of the crucial phrase, "oracular / Notations," which, split across a line-ending in the most striking enjambment of the poem, connects and divides two different kinds of knowledge. The Latin root of "oracular" has the meanings "plead" and "beseech" (Lewis and Short), while cognate—and relevant to the subtextual trope of the ocean as orator—are "oratio" and "orator"; pertinent senses include "Of the nature of . . . an inspired, divinely authoritative, or infallible utterance" (*OED*). For "oracular," then, the vatic or enigmatic, and speech, are key connotations; its typical milieu is that of religious or magical disclosure. "Notation," on the other hand, indicates, among other things, the "action of taking or making note of something" (*OED*). Brevity, clarity, and writing are its key connotations; its typical milieux are empirical, technical, or scientific. Rational observation and note making, such as the doctor in his astronomical avocation is familiar with,

are appropriated by a daimonic ocean that compels him both to look, taking (mental) note of what he sees (“these *visible* . . . delugings”), and to listen, hearkening, that is, to what it utters (“these . . . *voluble* delugings” [italics added]). In this doubleness of attention, the doctor, threatened—as the speaker will mockingly indicate in line 14—by his own “apocalypse,” finds himself in a position resembling that of the author of the canonical Apocalypse, who describes how he heard “a great voice . . . Saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last,” commanding, “What thou seest, write in a book” (Rev. 1.10–11), but who is also repeatedly enjoined not merely to record what he sees but also to write, as if from dictation, the utterances he hears.¹⁹

From the perspective of this, the penultimate tercet, another of Stevens’ rhetorical felicities becomes apparent, the effect of crescendo in his representations of the ocean. In its first manifestation the Pacific is no more than a “swell.” In the “long-rolling opulent cataracts,” this is amplified in terms that conceal a larger threat, that of a second, world-destroying inundation; for, in its root, “cataracts” signified the “‘flood-gates’ of heaven” (*OED*), the mechanism by which the waters above the firmament were thought to be held in check, a further instance, at the level of etymology, of Stevens’ dialectic of containment and eruption.²⁰ With the allusion in “visible, voluble delugings” to the Flood (the Deluge) of Genesis, the threat merges with the trope of ocean as orator in the comic but alarming prospect of a globally destructive, oceanic logorrhoea, the very form of the word—“delugings”—suggesting that, contrary to God’s covenant with Noah, these western waters constitute a continuing danger. In line 12 Stevens’ diction moves up yet another gear in “the wild, the ruinous waste” and pushes the rhetoric toward a crisis. Stevens’ play with containment and eruption continues (“wild” as “resisting control or restraint” [*OED*]), while “ruinous,” in its consequential sense, menacingly predicts what would result were the waters to break out over the land. Finally, in “wild” as “uncivilized” and in “waste,” the cultural values hinted at in the references to Racine and Bossuet and the intimations of abundance (“swell,” “opulent”) are, it seems, annulled.

The climactic progression from “Pacific swell” to “the wild, the ruinous waste” offers a further illustration of Stevens’ technical control. The *p* and *l* sounds of “Pacific swell,” a phrase which occupies only two feet in the pentameter line, modulate into the “long-rolling opulent cataracts,” whose stately measure appropriately fills four of the five, the short *a* vowels and hard *c/t* sounds of the noun contrasting with the liquid consonants and darker back vowels of the preceding adjectives as if to create a phonetic metaphor for the long upsurge and violent breaking of the waves. Line 9 with its twelve syllables stretches the limits of the line, the strong dactylic rhythms in “visible, voluble” enforcing themselves upon “delugings” so as to weaken the metrically required beat on its final syllable, thereby generating an impression of urgency. In line 12 “the wild,

the ruinous waste," with its alliterating *w* sounds, exemplifies at the phrasal level the wider auxesis discussed above.²¹

The collocation of "ruinous" and "waste" in the context of "city" in the following line sets off further biblical echoes. These words (and their cognates), sometimes in conjunction with "wild" or "wilderness," figure in the Old Testament as a common cluster. Of the eighteen appearances of "ruinous" and its cognates in the Old and New Testaments of the King James Bible, all but two arise either in relation to cities punished by God for their transgressions or cities whose restoration is promised, or in contexts where what is implied is the destruction of buildings or cultivated land. For the eighty-seven appearances of "waste" and its cognates, the figure is seventy-six. Though statistically less striking, the frequency with which "wild" or its cognates occurs in the context of "waste," "ruin," and "city," or their cognates supports the sense that we have here something akin to a formula. Thus, in a comic exaggeration and with an echo of Stevens' letter to Elsie Moll dated January 10, 1909 ("a city drowned in the Red Sea" [L 117]), the biblical connotations of "wild," "ruinous," and "waste" implicitly liken Geneva to the cities of the unrighteous destroyed by God, as if the doctor's failure to respond adequately also implicated the city he comes from.²²

To this charge, "unburgherly" adds a sneering note, insinuating not just that the doctor's supposedly narrow conception of polite manners is offended by the violence of the supposed "apocalypse," but also that no sensible person (such as the speaker and, by implication, the reader) would take the breaking of the waves for an apocalypse in the first place. Once again, at the level of the etymon, there is a further complexity, for "unburgherly" derives from a West Germanic root indicating a fortress and then a settlement protected by such a fortress, and so echoes the biblical theme of the destruction of cities adumbrated two lines earlier. It may be that, in the words of Luther's famous hymn, "Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott" ("A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"), but the doctor's city is not, it seems, to be spared. In his 1909 letter, Stevens wrote of a church "that has the grace to ring its bell on Sundays" (L 117). By contrast, the bells of the doctor's city seem in danger of leaping from their very stations,²³ for it is apparently just such a sense of orderliness, at once religious and civic, that is threatened by doctor's inability to bring within his world view a natural phenomenon that is the opposite of docile and resists in its unbounded restlessness any effort at imaginative accommodation.²⁴

The attack on the doctor continues in the precise associations of "apocalypse." The word, of course, signifies the removal of a cover or veil, yet another glance at the dialectic of containment and eruption. More narrowly, it signifies the "revelation" of the end of the world granted to St. John of Patmos, and hence the last book of the New Testament, in which that revelation is set forth. From early on, once it became clear that John's prophecy would find no literal fulfillment, a range of alternative interpre-

tations evolved, whose main thrust was either to recalculate the date of the expected end or to remove the event from the realm of history altogether and to propose, instead, anagogical readings. As the close of the seventeenth century approached, the conflict between the “new physics” and traditional Christian eschatology lent a greater urgency to projects to recalculate the end of the world. For the believer, as Perry Miller remarked, “Devastation would be a preliminary to regeneration,” heralding “the unending reign of right—and of the righteous” (173). “There is no more curious phenomenon in the history of our civilization than the fact that the triumph of modern physics over the imagination of mankind was achieved by a sustained effort to prove it not only compatible with the cherished hope, but actually a confirmation, a veritable guarantee, of a last violent concussion” (174). The doctor of Geneva is caught in this dilemma. What the scene before him stirs in his head are—precisely—“oracular / Notations.” In one phase of his persona, he represents the theology of Calvin; in another, he is the student of the stars, a disciple, it may be, of Newton.²⁵ But this doubling stands in a comic light, for Stevens’ sardonic tone assures us that what Revelation foretells—the end of time—can be regarded as safely postponed to a period so remote that the doctor’s anxiety makes him ridiculous.

The culminating vision of the Book of Revelation is of “the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven” (Rev. 21.2), its establishment representing the divine accomplishment of what had been realized only imperfectly in the human cities whose stories figured in the Old Testament. The typology springs from the Old Testament belief that the maintenance of Jerusalem was inseparable from the purposes of Yahweh and that a future Messianic kingdom would base itself upon “a precious corner *stone*, a sure foundation” laid in Zion (Isaiah 28.16), a belief that New Testament writers interpreted as a reference to Christ.²⁶ The parable of the houses built on sand and on rock belongs to this typology. In turn, the New Jerusalem became the model for various historical cities established under the Protestant faith, including Geneva and Boston. Cotton Mather’s biography of John Winthrop, *Nehemias Americanus*, “our New English Nehemiah,” in “our American Jerusalem,” illustrates the point. Nehemiah had rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem and, with Ezra, was responsible for the establishment of Judaism as an exclusive community. In his “epitaph” on Winthrop, Mather, paraphrasing into Latin some Greek verses of Josephus, replaced Josephus’ reference to “Jerusalem” with “New England” (Norton 344). The religious and civic community to which the doctor belongs aspires to the condition of a New Jerusalem. But although the doctor may or may not be shaken by the oceanic vista, his life will remain essentially unchanged; and this, too, is a measure of his poverty of spirit.

Implicit in the sequence of allusions there is a further twist. The previous verse (that is, the opening verse of the final chapter of Revelation) runs as follows: “And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first

heaven and the first earth were passed away"; and, in a phrase that confirms God's covenant with Noah after the Flood, the verse concludes: "there was no more sea" (Rev. 21.1). Even as the speaker ironically predicts the eruption of the Pacific over the sandy shore, Stevens' allusion cuts the other way.

The rising shrillness of tone has the effect of throwing into increasing doubt the trustworthiness of the speaker, an effect reinforced by the fact that the doctor, being apparently unaware of the criticisms directed at him, is denied the opportunity to defend himself. By dint of its watery harangue, the ocean has, we are told, driven him to silence; but we, too, have been harangued, have been, as it were, buttonholed by the speaker and made to give ear to his censures. As the poem unfolds, the origins of the alarm attributed to the hapless doctor seem as likely to lie in the mind of the speaker. To the degree that this is so, the protective distance separating speaker and doctor collapses, and the sarcasm turns back upon itself.

The contrast with Whitman's "Out of the Cradle" is illuminating. Whitman's "low and delicious word" is "Lisp'd" by a sea that is "edging near as privately for me rustling at my feet" (Norton 2116). In Stevens' poem, the volume is, as it were, turned up. The soothing and maternal overtones of Whitman's sea are replaced by associations that, although not explicitly gendered, are touched by the patriarchal cast of Stevens' biblical subtext. Moreover, Stevens outdoes Whitman by offering not a personal revelation but the advent of a second Flood; and, whereas in Whitman the song of the bird awakened in the adult poet his "own songs," in Stevens the outcome is the doctor's ineffectual sigh.

Of the poem's conclusion, Richardson suggests that the doctor's reaction is "to cry, to revert to a state without language at all" (120), but the multiple resonances within the previous fourteen lines generate an effect more complex than this reading indicates. Noteworthy in particular is the part rhythm plays in miming and thereby intensifying sense, for lines 13 and 14—"Until the steeples of his city clanked and sprang / In an unburgherly apocalypse"—are the most irregular in the whole poem.²⁷ Indeed, as the most extreme variation on the poem's normative pentameter, line 13, with its twelve syllables, can be heard as a metrical enactment of the thematic pattern of containment and eruption. The pentametric grid is all but breached as the line struggles to hold in place its additional syllables, an effect strengthened by the assonance of "clanked and sprang," by the rush of light syllables at the start of line 14, and by the consequent uncertainty the reader encounters in determining the pattern of metrical beats ("In an unburgherly apocalypse" or "In an *unburgherly* apocalypse"). The final line re-asserts the regular pentameter with a metrical firmness that belies the poem's shifting complexities of voice. This firmness contributes to the bathos of the concluding image, which can be seen as a final variation on the ruling motif of eruption and containment, the doctor dabbing at his eyes or wiping his nose, his sigh, too, being a kind of suppressed utter-

ance. In the end, the comic surface closes over and, provisionally at least, silences the turbulent voices that have been awakened. The plangent and unruly ocean does not break its bounds; the steeples of Geneva are not shaken except in metaphor; and the doctor requires only a handkerchief to help him cope.

V

The foregoing paragraphs have sketched some of the ways in which, in "The Doctor of Geneva," Stevens' imagination fed upon itself (to borrow a metaphor from his account of his walk at Long Beach) and have sought as well to suggest the richness of its verbal organization. In his essay "Concerning 'Le cimetière marin'" from which I quoted at the start, Valéry also says this: "Poetic necessity is inseparable from material form, and the thoughts uttered or suggested by the text of a poem are by no means the unique and chief objects of its discourse—but *means* which combine *equally* with the sounds, cadences, meter, and ornaments to produce and sustain a particular tension or exaltation" (147). Stevens can be a frustrating poet, precious, windily portentous, rambling, maddeningly obscure, but at his best he wrote some of the most luminous verse of the last hundred years. In its "material form"—its formal dispositions, its ironic and allusive density—"The Doctor of Geneva" is indeed a highly accomplished poem and deserves attention in its own right.

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Notes

¹ Wallace Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 19. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with page number only in parentheses. The poem was first published in *Poetry* in October 1921 in the group "Sur Ma Guzzla Gracile."

² Perhaps the earliest account of the poem, a not entirely inaccurate though very limited and in some ways misleading one, is from Stevens himself in a letter to Alice Corbin Henderson dated 27th March 1922: "The doctor of Geneva is the confined philosopher actual [*sic*] facing the illimitable (his field) in realism. The bland old gentleman who does the talking to the bland and credulous old ladies about him, with whom he is having tea anywhere—at the Palaz of Hoon if you like, is simply explaining everybody in terms of himself." (Filreis 16).

³ Of the 150 poems written before "The Doctor of Geneva," seventeen employ images of the sea. The majority of these date from the years either side of 1900.

⁴ Cf. "The Auroras of Autumn," II (355).

⁵ That Stevens' mind was running on Coleridge is suggested by the fact that in a journal entry five days earlier, he had asked himself, "Has there ever been an image of vice as a serpent coiled round the limbs and body of a woman, with its fangs in her pale flesh, sucking her blood?" (L 91). He might have found a partial answer had he turned to "Christabel."

⁶ In addition to poems specifically mentioned here, the list includes, among others, "The Paltry Nude Starts on a Spring Voyage," "Homunculus et la Belle Etoile," "The Place of Solitaires," and "New England Verses," VI ("Boston without a Note-book").

⁷ Richardson's further speculation that, as the German "Jaeckel" is "one of the diminutive forms" for "John," and since "Jaeckel" is the English equivalent for "Jekyll," a connection should be read with Stevenson's short novel *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is unconvincing (120).

⁸ Nine days later, in a variation of this idiom and with a further nod at French culture, Stevens remarks, "Surely the Gods, looking down on maidenly clerks in Empire and Directoire laugh in their sleeves" (L 124).

⁹ Definitions are drawn from the *Oxford English Dictionary* and Lewis and Short's *A Latin Dictionary*. Stevens' use of and pleasure in dictionaries is well attested. It is not necessary to my discussion to suppose that he drew upon such sources actively, merely that his education had made him sensitive to etymology.

¹⁰ Of its twenty-two words, seventeen are monosyllables (counting "stove-pipe" as two); the second tercet has ten monosyllables in nineteen words (counting "long-rolling" as two).

¹¹ The enduring nature for Stevens of the contrast between lakes and oceans is suggested by these lines from "Esthétique du Mal": "One wants to be able to walk / By the lake at Geneva and consider logic. . . / Lakes are more reasonable than oceans" (286).

¹² These spacings will recur, although in a more complex form, in "The Idea of Order at Key West," the singer taking over the doctor's position (thereby restoring the Long Beach gender-pattern), while the oblique relationship between speaker and reader is transformed into that between the speaker and the now directly addressed but silent Ramon Fernandez, whose role is congruent with that of the silent Prince in "Meditation."

¹³ The closing lines of Andrew Lang's sonnet on the *Odyssey*, which Stevens quoted in full in a letter to Elsie Moll on March, 24, 1907, provide an apposite instance of the marine version: "They hear like Ocean on a western beach / The surge and thunder of the Odyssey" (L 99). The whole sonnet is of interest, considering the opposition manifest in Stevens between the merits of remaining at home and the advantages of (mental) travel, as well as the particular situation described in "The Doctor of Geneva."

¹⁴ Of such matters, John Hollander remarks in his elegant book, *The Figure of Echo*, "the relation of echo and source is like the curious dialectic of the 'true' meanings of words: the etymon and the present common usage each can claim a different kind of authority. (The dialectic might be called the field of combat between synchrony and diachrony. That field is the domain of poetry as well)" (62).

¹⁵ Cf. the *OED*'s "Turgid or inflated style of language. . . 'Sentences constructed with the Ciceronian fulness and swell.'"

¹⁶ Lewis and Short define "volubilis" in this figurative sense as "*rapid, fluent* . . . the figure taken from rolling waters," while the *OED* illustrates "cataracts" with Cowper's "Cataracts of declamation."

¹⁷ Writing of Racine and Bossuet, Richardson refers to the "rhythms of their seventeenth-century lines" (121) and later claims that the doctor, "meeting the Pacific for the first time . . . recalled Bossuet and presented himself in the French master's prosaically adapted alexandrine rhythms" (193). Concerning Bossuet, Richardson is mistaken. Jacques Bénigne Bossuet (1627-1704) was distinguished not for composing verse but as a bishop, a religious controversialist and the most celebrated preacher of his day, responsible for "a body of truly sublime prose writings" marked by "the characteristics of true high style . . . gravity, power, amplitude" (Houston 83). That Stevens associated Bossuet with oratory and with prose appears both from "Meditation" and from his quotation of Mme de Staël in "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet": "*Nos meilleurs poètes lyriques, en France, ce sont peut-être nos grands prosateurs, Bossuet, Pascal, Fénelon, Buffon, Jean-Jacques*" (677).

¹⁸ Elmore argues that "through the use of the single word *plumb*" Stevens "depicts the fall of heaven" (38). He misdirects himself. The trope of the heavens as a vast deep

is common enough and attested by the *OED*. In any case, “plumb” does not, as Elmore claims, “describe the sky”; it indicates the action of the doctor in studying the sky.

¹⁹ As others have noted, the Book of Revelation had a persistent life in Stevens’ imagination. More generally, Stevens’ correspondence and his journal bear witness to his boyhood introduction to Christian literature and liturgy and to his familiarity with Scripture (*L* 98, 102, 141; *SP* 223–24).

²⁰ “Cataractae” and “cataractas” occur on six occasions in the Vulgate, twice in the Flood story (*Gen.* 7.11 and 8.2), the key source, twice in 4 Kings 7, in Isaiah 24.18 and in Malachi 3.10, all passages where the word has the sense indicated. Although Tennyson’s use of “cataracts” in “Locksley Hall” lacks the literary-metaphorical dimension exploited by Stevens, the poem is of interest as one that, in Hollander’s special sense, “provokes echoes” in “The Doctor of Geneva.” Tennyson’s hero, who lives in a house overlooking “the sandy tracts, / And the hollow ocean-ridges roaring into cataracts,” relates how “Many a night” he watched “Orion sloping slowly to the West” and, wandering on the beach, nourished his youth “With the fairy tales of science, and the long result of Time” (166). At the close, he declares “Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay,” and, hearing “the mighty wind . . . roaring seaward,” departs, turning his back on the orient where he was born, to face, by implication, westward toward a future whose optimistic vision the poem has articulated (176). This is in the 1830s; by 1886 and “Locksley Hall, Sixty Years After,” Tennyson’s optimism is severely tempered. Lensing notes Stevens’ youthful reading of Tennyson (74).

²¹ The effect obtains whether “wild” is read as an adjective qualifying “waste” or as a noun paralleled in apposition by “waste.”

²² Emerson’s “Seashore” employs a related allusion. Chiding the poet for his tardiness (like the doctor, a late-arriving “Pilgrim” to the shore), the sea contrasts the vanity of man’s “sculptured architecture” with his own works: “Lo! Here is Rome, and Nineveh, and Thebes, / Karnak, and Pyramid, and Giant’s Stairs, / Half-piled or prostrate” (*Collected Poems* 184). Emerson’s journal for July 23, 1857, makes clear the implication of “Half-piled or prostrate” (the personification perhaps distantly recalling the fate of Ozymandias), for there he wrote of “twenty Romes and Ninevehs and Karnacs in ruins together” (*Journals* 277). Behind these lines, as behind Stevens’, lies the Old Testament motif of the laying waste of cities, and, as Stevens does in his letter of January 10, 1909, Emerson brings together biblical and classical instances.

²³ Cf. Stevens’ 1899 sonnet for Santayana, “Cathedrals are not built along the sea,” in which Stevens opposes to the power of the ocean an aestheticized vision of a cathedral. As in “The Doctor of Geneva,” this opposition is expressed in terms of sound: the “tender bells would jangle on the hoar / And iron winds”; the “graceful turrets” would “roar / With bitter storms”; the “low and constant murmur of the shore” would fill the “precious organ pipes” and “down those golden shafts would rudely pour / A mighty and a lasting melody” (486). The overwhelming of the cathedral’s music by the music of the ocean anticipates (even in the implications of the adverb “rudely”—not just “violently” but also “In an uncultured, uncivil, discourteous, or unmannerly fashion” [*OED*])—the handling of these themes in the later poem.

²⁴ In section IV of “From the Journal of Crispin,” in a passage omitted from “The Comedian as the Letter C,” Stevens illustrates the principle that “The natives of the rain are rainy men” and denies that the “Burgher” is what he is through an autonomous act of will. Rather, he is the product of his environment and dwells “A part of wilful dwellings that impose / Alike his morning and his evening prayer. / His town exhales its mother breath for him / And this he breathes, a candid bellows-boy, / According to canon” (993). In the following stanza, cut back for “The Comedian,” Crispin proposes a “colony” in which secondhand frameworks of understanding are to be rejected in favor of direct and local experience. Thus, “Oblivious to the Aztec almanacs,” “Sepulchral señors . . . Shall make the intricate Sierra scan / In polysyllabled

vernacular," while "The dark Brazilian in his red café, / Musing immaculate, pampayan dits, / Shall scrawl a vigilant anthology / Not based on Camoëns" (994).

²⁵ This bifurcation affected Newton himself. Having published *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica*, he expended much effort after 1687 in a study of the books of Daniel and Revelation in the firm belief that "the last age" was fast approaching.

²⁶ For example, "Behold, I lay in Sion a chief corner stone, elect, precious: and he that believeth on him shall not be confounded" (1 Peter 2.6).

²⁷ According to Richardson, in order to mark "the unsuitability of the doctor to the American landscape" Stevens inserted into his poem "vagrant lines of French meter, the alexandrine" (120–21). Richardson does not identify her "vagrant lines of French meter." If we take as the only possible candidates the two twelve-syllabled lines (9 and 13), a further difficulty appears. Richardson claims that the "lines of French meter" "describe what the doctor sees when he looks at what most overwhelms him," but only line 9 makes any reference to the scene encountered by the doctor; line 13 describes the consequence of that encounter.

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The Never-Ending Meditation: Wallace Stevens' "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" and Pragmatic Theories of Truth

JULIANNE BUCHSBAUM

WALLACE STEVENS IS primarily a poet of ideas whose work is continually motivated by questions of how and what to believe in an age of disbelief and secular pluralism. Thus, approaching his work from a philosophically informed perspective seems a potentially fruitful way of reading him, and indeed, many critical studies have approached Stevens from various philosophical perspectives, including phenomenology, idealism, existentialism, poststructuralism, and pragmatism. Several issues arise repeatedly in the criticism, sometimes with only slight variations: how Stevens handles dichotomies between world and imagination, self and not-self, reality and language (and which of these terms, if either, he gives priority to); whether or not his use of the word "fiction" suggests that all our beliefs are false and illusory, or whether it suggests a kind of provisional hypothesis; what, if anything, can take the place of religious belief once it has been abandoned or destroyed; whether Stevens' poems aspire to unification and closure or seek to expose their own constructedness; and whether Stevens attempts, in writing, to escape from reality, organize reality, or find beauty in reality.

Formalist, New Critical readings of Stevens' poetry privilege order and logos over indeterminacy and flux and resolve the anxieties and disruptions in the work by privileging its closural or idealist gestures. By contrast, postformalist readers agree that Stevens' poems do not attempt to synthesize, transcend, or unify reality via the imagination; nor do they seek any final position (or hold out hope that there can be one); and that they are suspended in an epochal space of doubt in which ideas must continually be overturned and revisited. However, poststructural critics take this argument to an extreme by suggesting that Stevens' poetry circulates endlessly around an abyss, that his rhetorical figures are groundless and without referents, and that the poems do not hold out hope for a belief in any, even provisional, truths. According to Paul Bové, for instance, Stevens continually lays bare an abyss at the core of utterance. Bové points to "the constant penetration to nothingness which his various texts make in their testing of the traditional forms and tropes of poetry" (xv). He claims

that, for Stevens, “ ‘empirical reality’ is seen to be finally devoid of transcendent certitude; in the last measure, we are left with nothing but ‘fiction’ ” (181). David Jarraway also sees Stevens as moving away from “paradigms of presence” to an “infinite model of Absence” (145).

Postmodern readings of Stevens resemble the neopragmatism of Richard Rorty and Stanley Fish in privileging a radical skepticism along with a pessimistic or negative ontology. The understanding of “fictions” as utterances radically divorced from reality—in which one gives up the quest for truth or coherence and merely delights in the play of surfaces—has contributed to a picture of Stevens as an epistemological relativist or a skeptical aesthete. Neopragmatist readings of Stevens’ work occasionally conflate Jamesian and Rortian pragmatism and therefore see the poems more as anti-poems or destructive language events that exult in the metaphoricity of existence and resist tough-minded Jamesian truths about reality. Other recent pragmatist readings of Stevens, however, have contributed to this philosophically informed critical discourse by drawing Stevens back toward the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American pragmatist belief in the importance of the empirical real and in the belief that, although we may not ultimately know the empirical real in and of itself, we can, by a process of continually revising our beliefs, come to decide which descriptions of it are more satisfactory.

This latter strand of pragmatism, initially developed by Patricia Rae and Jonathan Levin, offers a useful approach to “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven.” It provides a necessary correction to readings of Stevens that take him too far in the direction of indeterminacy and an absence of meaning. “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” I believe, fulfills a commitment to the pragmatic strategy of re-seeing, testing, and revising its own propositions and of tethering the imagination to descriptions of the empirical real, the ordinary, and the actual.

According to the original American pragmatists, William James and John Dewey, truths are made not found, as our perceptions are already inscribed or contained within the contingencies of culture, environment, and convention. However, just because truths are conditioned by our subjectivity does not mean that all statements about truth must collapse into radical relativism or a kind of nihilism in which meaning becomes impossible. According to Levin, Stevens’ poetry emphasizes process, vital energy, and creative life forces; it blurs the line between what is world and what is poem. Stevens directs us away from first principles or static, unchanging truths and toward consequences and the fruits of beliefs as manifested in poetic language. Like William James in “The Will to Believe,” Stevens entertains beliefs that may ultimately turn out not to be true. Stevens believes that our willingness to indulge in fictions is just as necessary as our desire to eliminate falsehoods and errors from our ways of looking at the world. According to Levin, Stevens seeks to problematize the distinction between reason and unreason. His poetry demonstrates

that reason and the imagination are interdependent and that they incorporate rather than preclude each other. His work also shows that only through describing, witnessing, and taking up the phenomena of the world can the imagination achieve anything.

According to Rae, Stevens' poetry moves through various propositions without settling on one absolute final faith and without accepting any metaphysical foundations for them. Rae shows how Stevens, in his continual construction and destruction of hypotheses, delights in the process of moving back and forth between belief and doubt. Rae takes issue with critics who fail to distinguish between hypothesis and fiction in Stevens' work, and she makes clear that these two types of proposition should not be confused. Stevens does not say that we cannot know the truth (in other words, we may be able to know certain truths), and he also does not say that the truth can be known in a final way. A fiction is a patently false thing, whereas a hypothesis is provisional, open to verification or refutation in light of the facts of experiences (174). As Rae points out, Stevens' critics have overemphasized his belief in the power of the imagination and have therefore seen him as a kind of subjective idealist or solipsist. This is mistaken because Stevens does demonstrate a belief in the existence of actual things of the world beyond the mind of the maker, and he is always willing to submit his hypotheses to empirical tests.

Viewing "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" through the lens of pragmatism makes sense because the poem maintains a tenuous balance between a belief both in an external reality and in the importance of imaginative open-endedness. In the poem, pragmatism is a way of working outside both a foundationalism that would fix and reify forms of belief and a radical poststructuralism that would posit that it is only within language systems that meanings arise. Although the temptation to focus on the indeterminacy of Stevens' work is understandable, as it does seem to lend itself to poststructuralist accounts of how language works with its polyvalent wordplay and ludic self-contradictions, critics who privilege the indeterminacy of Stevens' work overlook a salient feature of his epistemology and poetics. He is always bringing us back to the real, what he would call the "rock" or "the first idea," and he insists that the real may not be the *end* of poetry, but that it is certainly the beginning.

"An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" opens with a statement that sounds as if one could behold a part of external reality in and of itself, without mediation. The "eye's plain version"¹ stands apart from the mind's interventions, distortions, and imaginative overlays. Thus, from the very first, the poem expresses a desire to escape from the fictive trappings of metaphysics (and metaphor). However, it is a "version" of the thing, not actually the thing itself, implying that access to external reality may not be possible. "Version" (from the Latin *vertere*, "to turn") implies a variation or copy, not the original or primary source of a thing. It also implies perspective and point of view, of which there may be an infinite variety.

The poem then immediately qualifies its initial assertion by adding “an and yet, and yet, and yet.” This suggests that although observation starts with a version of the real (the “vulgate of experience”), as the poet begins yet another segment of his “never-ending meditation,” he can never rest for long in the contemplation of the “thing apart” (397), but will immediately subject it to a shifting, restless dialectic of other versions, revisions, and resemblances. Although he wants to be, the poet is never satisfied with what he thinks of as the thing itself, yet “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” is perhaps Stevens’ most sustained attempt to be satisfied with it, to make the most out of the minimal elements of daily existence, to refuse as much as possible the figurative representations of the imagination.

I would argue that, in this poem, “ordinary” implies a sense of the empirical real that lies at the base of all our imaginings. The “ordinary” is also a modality of consciousness in which the anxious desire to distinguish subjective from objective is momentarily laid to rest, a mode of being in which something approaching pure perception can happen and the constant (and sometimes corrupting) ruminations of the mind are bracketed and held in suspension, so that a moment of less mediated (but never completely unmediated) sensory apprehension can break through. However, of course, no one can maintain such a state of attentive awareness for long. It is truly intolerable for us to remain in touch with the ordinary, to stop thinking and behold any one part of reality, for long. As Stevens admits in canto IV, “The plainness of plain things is savagery,” and to fight to stay within that plainness, to resist figuration, is ultimately futile as the mind will always launch forth again in search of “appeasement” (399). In fact, our imaginings are already “So much ourselves, we cannot tell” (398) where they stop and reality begins.

James’s writings on epistemological realism inform many of the arguments of the cantos, but particularly those of cantos VI and IX, which suggest that reality, although always mediated by the mind, is the indispensable base of our ideas and fictions. In *The Meaning of Truth*, James writes, “Ideas are so much flat psychological surface unless some mirrored matter gives them cognitive lustre. This is why as a pragmatist I have so carefully posited ‘reality’ *ab initio*, and why, throughout my whole discussion, I remain an epistemological realist” (106). In other words, for something to be true, it is not a sufficient condition that it be merely satisfying to the thinker or system builder; it must also be derived from and/or direct us toward a world of empirical matter. The above passage from James is echoed by the following passage from canto IX of “An Ordinary Evening”:

We keep coming back and coming back
To the real: to the hotel instead of the hymns
That fall upon it out of the wind. We seek

The poem of pure reality, untouched
By trope or deviation, straight to the word,
Straight to the transfixing object, to the object

At the exactest point at which it is itself,
Transfixing by being purely what it is,
A view of New Haven, say, through the certain eye,

The eye made clear of uncertainty, with the sight
Of simple seeing, without reflection. We seek
Nothing beyond reality. (402)

The poem thus, in echoing James's pluralistic empiricism, disavows a hypostasizing metaphysics and the distortions of religious doctrines. We do not need "hymns"; we need "hotels," places of transition and impermanence, places where we can stay anonymously on our way to someplace else. The poem of "pure reality," of course, may never be found, but the process of seeking it is what drives the poem forward and impels it to interrogate not only the rhetoric of an onto-theological metaphysics of presence but also its own rhetorical gestures toward structures of meaning. Yet, Stevens must postulate reality from the first, as James does, because this preserves at least the possibility that the "rock," truth, or reality-in-itself will eventually be uncovered and freed of ambiguous shadows.

Stevens also reminds us in canto VI of his commitment to epistemological realism, his belief that no matter how mediated and mirrored the real may be, it is ontologically prior to these mediations:

Reality is the beginning not the end,
Naked Alpha, not the hierophant Omega,
Of dense investiture, with luminous vassals. (400)

The "luminous vassals" of Omega, the hyper-mediated hierophant, remind one of the "cognitive lustre" of the James passage. They are luminous only insofar as they have come in and through the real. They would have neither luster nor luminosity if they were constructs of the mind alone. Stevens writes in his brief note "The immense poetry of war" about how the actuality of war affects one's thinking and makes the desire for facts and factuality more urgent than during times of peace. Nowhere does he state that facts exist or are universally true, but as he puts it, "We leave fact and come back to it, come back to what we wanted fact to be, not to what it was, not to what it has too often remained. The poetry of a work of the imagination constantly illustrates the fundamental and endless struggle with fact" (251). In other words, we may want facts to be epistemologically airtight or universally true, but they are most often not. Nevertheless, we do have to contend with them endlessly. The imagination may

otherwise succumb to the perversions of surrealism, a literary genre Stevens expresses contempt for in his prose because "it invents without discovering" (919).

In canto VI, Stevens opposes the naked, infant, novice Alpha to the "twisted, stooping, polymathic Z," or Omega. He allies Alpha with the Inexquisite Eye, That-Which-Is, the bare, plain, and mundane, the poet in "a state of faith uncorrupted by reflection" (Rae 178). Omega, or Z, on the other hand, is allied with the Exquisite Eye, That-Which-Is-Apprehended, the adult and adulterated, a thoroughly troped (he is literally "twisted") knowledge-seeker (as "exquisite" comes from the Latin for "to search or seek out" ["ex" + "quirere"]). For one (Alpha), the scene (the world, existence) is enough in and of itself; for the other (Omega), it is not. However, "For neither is it profound absentia," because both are "Custodians" (400) of their respective senses of reality. For neither is reality, at its core, a nothingness, because both believer and skeptic, ephebe and master, create their own structures and schemas by which to make sense of phenomena.

As mentioned above, Stevens' pragmatic sensibility also finds expression in this poem in his repeated use of terms such as "ordinary," "plain," and "commonplace." Contrary to both Vendler's and Bloom's reading of the poem as being concerned with issues of aging and decay (whether despairing in its leaflessness or exulting in its fictive evasions), a pragmatic reading of the poem reveals Stevens' attempt "to find what will suffice" (219) in the quotidian phenomena of a regular evening in a house in an ordinary town in America. It is not a holiday, nor a special occasion, nor does it take place in an exotic locale such as Key West, Yucatan, or Tehuantepec. The poem does not absolutely exclude exoticism but succeeds in tempering it at the same time as it locates the heterogeneous sublime in the commonplace. The poem does not need to travel outward to faraway places in order to unsettle and displace; it travels inward instead and finds the *unheimlichkeit* right at home, which is its great triumph. Seen from this perspective, the poem's emphasis on ordinariness is not at all an impoverishment, as Vendler would have it (273), nor an *askesis*, as Bloom would have it (327). Although it is certainly, at least in part, a meditation on the approach of death and the loss of sexual potency, it is, more than that, an exploration and celebration of whatever significance, meaning, and pleasure inhere in the empirical here and now.

Thus, Stevens brings us back again and again to the plainness of the unadorned; no matter how fantastic the evasions and embroideries of the imagination, there is always, for the speaker, "One part / Held fast tenaciously in common earth" (400), which gives blood to the otherwise empty abstractions of the truth-seeking mind. This recursive chastening of the imagination by turning it back upon the mundane is akin to the pragmatic strategy of empirical observation in the testing of hypotheses and the working out of ideas in terms of actual practice. James, Dewey, and Charles

Peirce stressed the importance of verifying hypotheses through scientific investigation and experiment and argued that truths are provisional, not absolute or conclusive, and ought to be defined in terms of their usefulness or how they actually work out in practice. As Dewey puts it:

[T]he human world, whether or no it have core and axis, has presence and transfiguration. It means here and now, not in some transcendent sphere. It moves, of itself, to varied incremental meaning, not to some far off event, whether divine or diabolic. Such movement constitutes conduct, for conduct is the working out of the commitments of belief. (170)

The poem's insistence on returning us to the ordinary, commonplace, and real is accompanied by a recognition that the mind is always in the process of inventing forms of the real and investing these forms with significance. Stevens' view of the mind's powerful role in the construction of its own reality is suggested by the following lines from canto VII:

In the presence of such chapels and such schools,
The impoverished architects appear to be
Much richer, more fecund, sportive and alive.

The objects tingle and the spectator moves
With the objects. (400–01)

Here, the chapels and schools represent socially constructed institutions that have been built by the architects. The architects have designed the buildings literally, but they are also architects of social conventions, and the systems and conventions they invent in turn construct and invent them. They are impoverished when isolated from the animating mythologies that they themselves create, but when embedded in their socio-historical contexts, they are fertile creators of the truths about their environments. Even the objects seem to come to life and gain sentience as the spectator does not use or transform them but moves *with* them. Here, the objects are paradoxically not objectified but put into a relational context with the "spectator" (a word that again reminds us of the importance of the eye, of sight and seeing in the poem). The objects are no longer abstract forms but are invested with the perceptions and affectivity of the human who moves among them. This willingness not only to embrace the mundane and commonplace but also to accept responsibility for investing them with meaning is typical of the pragmatic aesthetics of the poem.

As James says in an early essay, "the knower is not simply a mirror floating with no foot-hold anywhere, and passively reflecting an order that he comes upon and finds simply existing. The knower is an actor. . . . Mental interests, hypotheses, postulates . . . help to *make* the truth which

they declare" (*Essays in Philosophy* 21). This belief in the constructed nature of truths is also asserted by Stevens (and subsequently qualified) in canto XVIII:

The life and death of this carpenter depend
On a fuchsia in a can—and iridescences
Of petals that will never be realized,

Things not yet true which he perceives through truth,
Or thinks he does, as he perceives the present,
Or thinks he does. . . . (408)

The carpenter (also a trope for the poet, thinker, or creator, like the architects) is one who both literally and figuratively constructs models (or hypotheses or blueprints) and whose "chest of tools" signifies a linguistic system out of which the city, or communal reality, is constructed. It is a life-or-death matter (reminding one of James's "living option" [*Will to Believe* 14]), this purplish-red flower in a can. In other words, a beautiful object stuck in a plain utilitarian object (not a decorative vase, for instance) and the mere possibility of iridescences, although they may never be observed, is what matters. The construction of fictions and beliefs in iridescences (for "iridescences" one may read "truths that may be possible") is indeed a living option for Stevens, who believed that after the loss of a belief in God or any metaphysical foundations for such belief, the mind needs to create new compensatory forms of meaning in order to fend off an otherwise intolerable experience of being unmoored and bereft.

Over the course of thirty-one cantos, Stevens succeeds in both keeping his subject unfixed and enacting the pragmatic method of bringing the weight of reality to bear on imaginative figurations and abstract propositions. Each of the cantos sets forth an argument that succeeding cantos contradict, revise, develop, or confirm. James claims in "The Will to Believe" that "we must go on experiencing and thinking over our experience, for only thus can our opinions grow more true; but to hold any one of them . . . as if it never could be re-interpretable or corrigible, I believe to be a tremendously mistaken attitude" (22). This kind of "practical faith" (faith, that is, that opinions can "grow more true" if the human mind continues to revise them) infuses Stevens' very style, in terms of its continual morphings and revisions of an original image or statement, the accretions of qualifying adjectives and adverbs, and the repetitions of nouns slightly altered and re-described (e.g., "Things not yet true which he perceives through truth, / Or thinks he does, as he perceives the present, / Or thinks he does"). Both formally and in terms of content, the poem continually turns back on itself, stitching and re-stitching the threads of the speaker's thoughts. The poem thus suggests the Jamesian pragmatic principle that beliefs must continually be tested empirically and experientially and that

the thinker must always recursively test and re-test hypotheses against new evidence that comes to light.

In the third stanza of canto I, houses become mere appearances, shells or forms, empty of meaning and significance unless a “second giant kills the first” (397). In other words, unless a new hypothesis comes to supplant an old one, unless a newer “imagining” or framework of reality is allowed to break in upon the old, the houses—representing the temporary resting-place of the questing mind—will become dilapidated. Such a life would become unlivable because too static, not festive or mythological enough for the spirit or self to inhabit. As Emerson writes in his essay “Fate,” “Every spirit makes its house; but afterwards the house confines the spirit” (333). Not only do we create the metaphysical houses of being in which we live, we are also constantly outgrowing them, shedding them like skins as they no longer answer to our changing needs.

In canto II, however, we are invited to consider houses not only as habitations of the self but also as actually composed of the selves that inhabit them. The entire stanza consists of one sentence, a hypothetical statement whose meanings both extend the terms of the hypothesis and complicate and turn back upon those terms. If “houses are composed of” (397) selves, neighborhoods of such houses comprise an unreal town that recedes into impalpability, as it seems to exist in the mind alone. It is, in other words, a town of solipsists. Time and place are irrelevant, and the events of the mind are “Obscure,” “uncertain,” “indefinite,” and “Confused” (398). Thus, Stevens reverses the significance of the houses in canto I (the “recent imaginings[s] of reality” [397] that resemble the sun and therefore seem to represent modes of temporary cognitive certainty). If houses are composed only of the selves that live in them (and not of other selves outside of them), then those selves are trapped in a solipsistic universe in which they cannot distinguish real from unreal, truth from illusion.

Another important exemplification of the process of pragmatic revision is the transitional movement from canto XX to canto XXI. The man thinking alone in his room is emblematic of the desire to escape the figurations of the imagination, the subjective “transcripts” of emotion that cloud the thinker’s ability to penetrate to the real or the true. It is an expression of a desire for radical epistemological self-sufficiency, a desire to “escape[] the impure” (409), to inhabit a realm unmarred by other subjectivities, free from social responsibilities. He may, just for a moment, indulge in the hypnotizing fantasy of absolute freedom and independence, where all meaning is self-created, where “the Real” arises from some pure Platonic sanctuary within the depths of the self, where truth and being do not have to answer to other selves or take others into consideration. When Stevens writes, “To have evaded clouds and men leaves him / A naked being with a naked will / And everything to make” (409), he is indicating that one cannot exist in this self-enclosed sphere for long, because everything still needs to be made. The connection between “nakedness” and

the need for “making” is emphasized by the assonance of the words “evaded,” “naked,” and “make.”

Furthermore, Stevens rests only for a moment in the “hypnosis” of this postulate and then immediately retracts it in the following canto: “But he may not. He may not evade his will, / Nor the wills of other men; and he cannot evade / The will of necessity, the will of wills” (410). Here again is an example of the process of self-correction and revision. The thinker may want to purge himself of all illusions, yet he knows that he cannot rid himself of them in his transformations of the real. He cannot live in a self-created, sealed-off world of his own imagining for long but must always come back to the rock of mundane reality. No matter how we may want to evade the wills of others or of necessity—except during brief and solitary flights of imagination—we cannot.

The “rigid realists” mentioned in the third stanza of canto VII are similar to those thinkers decried by James as clinging to concepts and categories that have outlived their usefulness, those who distort the actual reality of things as appearances and the “truth about themselves,” which is precisely “That power to conceal they had as men” (401). In other words, the desire for the absolute, for communion with the in-itself, the incontrovertible *res*, denies the flux of reality and turns the realists into things themselves. The abdication of their human subjectivity results from their denial of the fact that they themselves are the “immaculate interpreters of life” (400) rather than receivers of immaculate interpretations from on high. When these men become “things,” they are reduced to “antic symbols” (401)—narrow, essentialized stereotypes of themselves, which appear to be the “truths” about them that they formerly had the power to disguise via their powers of self-representation. They are like the marble statues of canto XII after the wind has died down, or the moon in canto X: leafless, thoughtless, and absolutely sterile.

Stevens is neither a complete skeptic or relativist, nor is he a complete empiricist or realist; rather, “An Ordinary Evening” exemplifies James’s and Dewey’s emphasis on the provisional, relational, and utilitarian aspects of knowledge and the belief that truths do not arise *ex nihilo* nor exist in an ahistorical realm. According to the modern pragmatists, truths are not established via abstract syllogisms nor ratified by a transcendent deity. Rather, thinking is a process that takes place on an entirely human plane, truths are discovered in relation to other truths and thinkers, and the criterion for their status as truths is whether or not they are useful, whether or not they remove obstacles to happiness, whether or not they “work.” The “rigid realists” mentioned in canto VII, then, correspond to those “intellectualist” thinkers refuted by James in one of his lectures on the mistakes of “intellectualism” in *A Pluralistic Universe*:

The misuse of concepts begins with the habit of employing them
privatively as well as positively, using them not merely to as-

sign properties to things, but to deny the very properties with which the things sensibly present themselves. . . . It is but the old story, of a useful practice first becoming a method, then a habit, and finally a tyranny that defeats the end it was used for. Concepts, first employed to make things intelligible, are clung to even when they make them unintelligible. (99)

Although the propositions of a poem, of course, cannot necessarily be verified or disproved in terms of action in the world, the strategies of a poem can be seen as analogous to methods of scientific and/or philosophical inquiry. Statements that are asserted can be supported, developed, exploded, undermined, contradicted, etc. Although Stevens is often abstract, he is never exclusively so. He always develops and complicates his abstractions by tying them to specific details and observations. For instance, canto VIII proclaims:

We descend to the street and inhale a health of air
To our sepulchral hollows. Love of the real

Is soft in three-four cornered fragrances
From five-six cornered leaves, and green, the signal
To the lover, and blue, as of a secret place

In the anonymous color of the universe. (401)

This descent from an ethereal (perhaps Platonic) world of abstract forms, much like the room of canto XX, in which the thinker secludes himself and tries to escape from the "impure" particulars of the world, constitutes a rejoining of the community. The "street" here can be seen as a synecdoche for human intercourse, a place where traffic in meaning occurs. The air here is also health-giving, a clearing away of the deadening sterility of abstractions. Stevens then goes on to particularize "Love of the real" by defining it in mathematically specific terms, rendering geometric forms empirical and palpable through synaesthetic imagery.

One of the poem's strongest articulations of a pragmatic epistemology of transition, dialectic, and evolution occurs in canto X. This canto is an evocative analogue of what happens when a mind becomes enamored of closure and absolute certainty. This canto touches on many important themes of pragmatism and also displays Stevens' double awareness of our need for useful provisional truths and the flawed modalities of human cognition by which those truths are discovered and created. The canto begins, "It is fatal in the moon and empty there" (402), and proceeds to turn back and forth between a lunar world of barren sterility and the human world of uncertainty, enigma, and impermanence. Although the moon seems perfect and pure in its cold, white, and unchanging isolation (which

makes it an ideal site upon which to project figurations), it is a deadly place precisely because it is devoid of any human consciousness to create and/or respond to meaning.

The man who haunts the moon, a figure much like the “rigid realists,” represents those who privilege a cognitive modality of absolute certainty. He is a man “Of bronze whose mind was made up and who, therefore, died” (403). He corresponds to those whom Dewey would describe as denying the provisional and transitional nature of thought and knowledge and who instead fetishize the truth as “a redeeming angel which at a critical juncture transforms the fragile creature, thought, into an ambassador with power plenipotentiary to the court of the Absolute” (123). Thinking, according to Dewey, does not follow rigid laws and formal principles imposed from without. Thinking is a process that is occasionally unruly and ungovernable but that subtly responds to the fluctuating and sometimes contradictory appearances of empirical phenomena. The man who haunts the moon and the “rigid realists” are those, such as F. H. Bradley, who insist that reality must never contradict itself and must be “ ‘self-consistent’ ” (128). These idealists and absolutists are unable to delight in the “hallucinations in surfaces” (403), a phrase that is reminiscent of Nietzsche’s observations about the human need to dwell on surfaces, our need for and pleasure in deceptive appearances (e.g., “[L]ife has not been devised by morality: it *wants* deception, it *lives* on deception” [4–5]). Or, as Stevens puts it in canto V:

Reality as a thing seen by the mind,

Not that which is but that which is apprehended,
A mirror, a lake of reflections in a room. . . . (399)

Here it is not the knower who is a mirror, as in the early James essay, but it is the matter as filtered through the knower (“that which is apprehended”) that is a mirror of the knower. These lines suggest that reality is mediated always and everywhere and that access to the *res*, or in-itself reality, is impossible. As Jonathan Levin puts it, “The paradox about reality, for Stevens, is that to isolate and approach it, one has to recognize that it is always and inevitably intermixed with what we pejoratively call ‘illusion’ ” (171). The real is seen as an always-mirrored thing, refracted through the mind and the imagination, never an actual lake but always “a lake of reflections in a room.” The speaker of “An Ordinary Evening” longs for certainty and pure reality, yet he is aware (and the poem reveals) that this itself is already a “deviation” or a trope. The real already includes “the spirit’s alchemicana” (402).

Paradoxically, language seems to fix things, to define them, to hold them still for a moment, while the pragmatic poet and thinker, who can only use language, wants to show them unfixed, undefined, in states of transi-

tion between belief and disbelief, becoming and being. In his essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," Stevens discusses the importance of evasions: "If it is defined, it will be fixed and it must not be fixed. . . . To fix it is to put an end to it. Let me show it to you unfixed" (664). The unfixed nature of the process of thought is portrayed as whirling and flickering leaves in canto XII:

The mobile and the immobile flickering
In the area between is and was are leaves,
Leaves burnished in autumnal burnished trees

And leaves in whirlings in the gutters, whirlings
Around and away, resembling the presence of thought,
Resembling the presences of thoughts, as if,

In the end, in the whole psychology, the self,
The town, the weather, in a casual litter,
Together, said words of the world are the life of the
world. (404)

As Stevens' persona Professor Eucalyptus says in canto XXII, " 'The search / For reality is as momentous as / The search for god.' . . . To re-create, to use / The cold and earliness and bright origin / Is to search" (410–11). The primacy of the searching process is an important element of the pragmatic method and of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." As Bloom points out, this poem can be seen as Emersonian in its dialectical quest for the truths that may never be attained (310). Minus the teleology, Stevens' view of this quest for truth is also akin to that described by Peirce in "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," when he writes: "all the followers of science are animated by a cheerful hope that the processes of investigation, if only pushed far enough, will give one certain solution to each question to which they apply it. . . . They may at first obtain different results, but, as each perfects his method and his processes, the results are found to move steadily together toward a destined centre" (38).

As Stevens writes in canto V, disillusion itself is "the last illusion," and this poem is a long attempt to indulge in the trope of getting rid of tropes, the stripping away of illusions to reveal, not the real, but the intertwining of real and unreal ("Everything as unreal as real can be" [399]). According to Dewey, thinking is a way of coming to terms with the various competing and contradictory values and meanings in the world that give rise to discord and unhappiness. Instead of making the "brute attack" on these incompatibilities and sources of discord that dogmatic idealism does, pragmatism addresses problems with a more indirect method of "inquiry into the disordered state of affairs and [of] framing views, conceptions, of what the situation would be like were it reduced to harmonious order" (133).

Although “An Ordinary Evening” never reduces its multiplicitous views into one “harmonious order,” it does make harmonies out of them, meanings and brief moments where the thinker can return to the mundane and rest for a moment before continuing on in his never-ending quest for the extraordinary.

“An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” reveals a double-awareness that we are grounded in a real and shared external world and we are also simultaneously constructing our own senses of that world. There is no such thing as unmediated perception, even at the level of raw sensory data. As soon as we perceive something, whether ordinary or extraordinary, we make sense of it by fitting it into categories and linguistic patterns that may not correspond to the way that thing is in-itself. The poem suggests that we are all architects of meaning and that we need these meanings to make life not only tolerable but also comprehensible and pleasurable. The poem, on the level of both rhetoric and content, insists on a pragmatic theory of truth that is consistent with the thoughts of the prominent early pragmatists James, Dewey, and Peirce on the nature of epistemology. We are not passive receivers but creators of truths, and an essential part of truth- and meaning-making is that it is an ongoing, relational process. Our cognitive agency allows us to adhere to provisional beliefs that work for us, but ultimately beliefs are provisional and ought to be adaptable to the vicissitudes and changing conditions from which they arise. Knowledge is less a matter of exposing static and unchanging truths than—as Dewey and James establish in their writings and as “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” suggests—an evolutionary and transitional endeavor. It involves the recursive questioning and revising of hypotheses and is more faithful to the phenomena of life and the workings of the mind among those phenomena.²

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Notes

¹ Wallace Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 397. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with page number only in parentheses.

² I am grateful to Frances Dickey for her helpful suggestions and comments on this paper.

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Lapsed Latin: Etymology, Image Schemas, and Multilingual Wordplay in Stevens' "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction"

MICHAEL SINDING

THE RESOLUTIONS THAT can come from attending to Wallace Stevens' heroic wordplay are more satisfying than the allegorizing we tend to fall into on first readings, as Eleanor Cook and others have shown. Untangling puns and riddles does better justice to the pungency and playfulness of individual words and phrases, which hint that Stevens means more than he seems to. It fits the gestalt recognitions he provokes us to seek, the sense of miniature apocalypse in suddenly "getting it," however provisional and revisable they may be.¹ Cook discusses what this meditation on the nature of "the poem" in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," a poem about poetry, implies for critics' sense that Stevens' meaning "hovers" or "flitters" (*Poetry* 244):

The poem goes from the poet's gibberish to
The gibberish of the vulgate and back again.
Does it move to and fro or is it of both

At once? Is it a luminous flittering
Or the concentration of a cloudy day? . . .

It is the gibberish of the vulgate that he seeks . . .

To compound the imagination's Latin with
The lingua franca et jocundissima. (342-43)²

The mind moves back and forth between recognizing the anatomized parts of the conceit and recognizing the various new compound wholes they can enter into. We see the connection of "Vulgate" and Latin as educated culture and language (hence elevating), then see "vulgate" as of the common people, and *lingua franca* as bridging speakers of different tongues (hence leveling). We hover above one analysis of the meaning of segments, to descend to a thematic integration of the whole, then hover again over

the same or a new analysis of parts, to descend again to another resolution—a cycling progression Hollander finds characteristic of Stevens (“Sound” 235). Cook teases out the sometimes converging, sometimes competing claims of various dimensions of word-meaning in this process, from primary sense in context to etymology (vulgar, vernacular) to allusion (Vulgate).

This process of decreation and recompounding, which underlies the poetic reading experience, is also a major theme in Stevens. It works at many levels, and I want to reconsider how Stevens’ etymological play refracts into allusion and allegorical meaning. If, as Emerson said, “Language is fossil poetry” (13) in its history of using concrete images to capture abstract ideas, and if, as Stevens states in a letter, “in the long run, poetry would be the supreme fiction” (L 430), then etymology is archaeology of a form of supreme fiction. K. K. Ruthven sounds these depths: “One often feels when reading poetry that certain passages have been suggested if not actually controlled by . . . etymological probing into the meaning of names” (25). Ruthven shows how Milton and Mallarmé are great and principled “poetymologists.” Milton had a “theory of decadence” that the world uses words so as to make them fall away from original meaning, and the poet’s job is to repair this aspect of man’s ruin. Mallarmé used a dictionary to discover how to restore a “sens plus pur . . . aux mots de la tribu” (the basis for Eliot’s desire to “purify the dialect of the tribe”) (14–15). They were great precursors to Stevens, but their concerns must be recast to fit his specific sense of the modern conditioning of religious ideas. His vision of life is analogous to the religious but rejects the theological imperative of restoration to some original blessed state. In the modern world we must build what will refresh life out of the material of earthly origins. Hence he approaches the lexicon as he does mythology: he wants to bring forth new realities from new compoundings, by playing with original etymological meanings in false and folk etymologies, in puns and riddles.

Walter Redfern calls “fractured French” the kind of wordplay that turns *coup de grâce* into “lawnmower” (164): a French grammatical pun on the subject noun (*coup*[-er], “to cut” for *coup*, “blow, strike”) is combined with a bilingual noun pun on the noun modifier (*grass* for *grâce*) to motivate a mapping of the whole French phrase to the English one.³ Lewis and Short’s *Latin Dictionary* gave Stevens delight, as he told Robert Frost upon making him a gift of it (Cook, *Poetry* 40, n 24). Latin, as one of the parent languages of English and strongly associated with philosophical and religious themes as well as great poetry, has a special role in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” as an elementary language of the imagination.⁴ The best example of the need for this reconsideration is the universal reading of the superb expression “fluent mundo” as something like “flowing and speaking earth.” Because of its use in the essay “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet,” and because of the Spanish word’s associations with English words such as “mundane” and the French “monde,” “mundo” is

taken as the new world of the imagination, the earth seen accurately.⁵ The play on the polysemy of “fluent” as both flowing and speaking well is clear enough. What critics have not noticed is a secondary play on the basic meaning of “mundo” in Latin—according to Lewis and Short, to cleanse or make clean, interpreted both ceremonially, according to the Levitical law of uncleanness, and spiritually, from sin, according to the Vulgate. The Book of Revelation is an important intertext, and reading “fluent[um]” as subject noun, meaning river, and “mundo” as modifying adjective recalls the river of life in the city of Revelation, identifying the fat girl, the earth, with that river, as well as with the earthly river in the earthly city of the speaker (the Seine in Paris). Indeed, “mundo” and its cognates are prominent throughout the Vulgate. In Revelation, “mund-” is played upon by being connected to the linen clothing of angels (15:6), the world (17:8), and the street of the city (21:21). The comparison of the pure gold of the city to clear glass (“*civitas auro mundo simile vitro mundo*” [21:18]) extends the chain of association to the glass seas of 4:6 and 15:2, and thus to the “pure river of water of life,” said to be “clear as crystal” (22:1). Stevens’ naming of his fat girl/earth projects spiritual resurrection and salvation as a purifying of imaginative perception of the world. Latin restores at least the basic “cleansing” meaning to the flowing and speaking world, and the Revelation allusions suggest more. This complex of imagery, pun, and simile now links strongly with Stevens’ “gilded street,” and his last line, “You will have stopped revolving except in crystal” (351),⁶ and ties the conclusion to the opening cantos on cleansing the imagination. The rich polysemy of Lewis and Short’s entries opens up many other possible perspectives on Stevens. Let us look again then at some arcana of the “Canon Aspirin” cantos in terms of what I will call, adapting Redfern’s phrase, “lapsed Latin”—that is, multilingual wordplay based on etymological thought.

My reconsideration extends recent theories of metaphor to these other devices of poetry. George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, and Mark Turner understand metaphor as a projection of *image-schematic structure* from a well-understood concrete source-domain onto a more abstract or subjective target domain.⁷ Metaphors of life or love as a journey project our conventional knowledge of journeys onto these abstract domains. That knowledge is structured by the image schema of a path, which has a starting point, an endpoint, and a sequence of points in between through which one passes. Johnson describes image schemas as “recurring, dynamic pattern[s] of our perceptual interactions and motor programs that give[] . . . coherence and structure to our experience.” They are gestalt structures consisting of “a small number of parts and relations, by virtue of which [they] can structure indefinitely many perceptions, images, and events” (*Body* xiv, 29). Image schemas help make our conceptual structures systematically metaphoric, subtending coherence within metaphors (over various expressions of a source-target mapping: “at this point in life, I’m stalled / lost / blaz-

ing a new trail / exploring various avenues," etc.), and across them (any action can be seen in terms of pathwise motion). Such mappings are pervasive in language and fundamental to etymological and poetic thought. Many of the words in the above discussion, for example, have both visuo-motor and conceptual meanings—move, hover, compound, parts, whole, analyze—and a browse through any dictionary will show how important these factors are in etymology. I explore the hunch that etymological play should resonate with the larger image-schematic structures embodied in the poem's images, narrative, and conceptual concerns.⁸

The narrative of these cantos, such as it is, describes the Canon's rich meal, then his declamatory praise of his sister and her treatment of her daughters. It moves on to his sublime night thoughts (perhaps in dream) of himself as an angel descending to contemplate the children, then flying up to "the utmost crown of night" (348). A meditation on the possible identity of the imagined angel with the "I" who imagines "him" asks, "What am I to believe?" (349) and closes with the lines,

These external regions, what do we fill them with
 Except reflections, the escapades of death,
 Cinderella fulfilling herself beneath the roof? (350)

The initial sense here is deflationary. It suggests that the Canon's noble-seeming imaginings are mere projections, narcissistic fairy tales of transcendence driven by the fear of death, blocking rather than revealing reality. The next canto moves on to a triumphant declaration of action and enjoyment equal to angels, but in a humbler human sphere of bird watching, practical work, lovemaking, and the rest of the daily round.⁹

We need some thematic context to clarify the issues. This third section of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" concerns the pleasure the supreme fiction must give. The first canto inverts conventional associations of aesthetics with ease and religion with difficulty. The pleasure must not be ritual and communal, which would be "a facile exercise" (344). Rather, it is an almost ascetic practice of contemplating spontaneous, natural moments of vision:

But the difficultest rigor is forthwith,
 On the image of what we see, to catch from that

Irrational moment its unreasoning,
 As when the sun comes rising, when the sea
 Clears deeply, when the moon hangs on the wall

Of heaven-haven. These are not things transformed.
 Yet we are shaken by them as if they were.
 We reason about them with a later reason. (344–45)

The essence of pleasure is change, we are told (337, 339, 344), and a crucial earlier passage instructs us in the origin of change:

Two things of opposite natures seem to depend
On one another, as a man depends
On a woman, day on night, the imagined

On the real. This is the origin of change.
Winter and spring, cold copulars, embrace
And forth the particulars of rapture come. (339)

These lines culminate with the Whitmanian "Follow after, O my companion, my fellow, my self, / Sister and solace, brother and delight" (339). Opposing elements are implicitly aligned (man–day–imagined; woman–night–real), but more important is the mingling of identities, as sister and brother are introduced as metaphorical aspects of one person, equivalent to companion, fellow, and self—a muse or interior paramour. The tercet emphasizes creation of new elements of pleasure from the change produced by the joining, rather than the alteration, of opposites: a metaphoric birth from sexual union.

Stevens' own remarks on the Canon and his sister dwell on the "law of contrast" between them as imaginative versus factual spirit, but also on their final integration:

If the sense of reality makes more acute the sense of the fictive, so the appreciation of the routine, the mechanism etc. intensifies appreciation of the fictive. The law of contrast is crude. . . . The sophisticated man: the Canon Aspirin, (the man who has explored all the projections of the mind, his own particularly) comes back, without having acquired a sufficing fiction, — to, say, his sister and her children. His sister has never explored anything at all and shrinks from doing so. He is conscious of the sensible ecstasy and hums laboriously in praise of the rejection of dreams etc. . . .

For all that, it gives him, in the long run, a sense of nothingness, of nakedness, of the finality and limitation of fact; and lying on his bed, he returns once more to night's pale illuminations. He identifies himself with them. He returns to the side of the children's bed, with every sense of human dependence. But there is a supreme effort which it is inevitable that he should make. If he is to elude human pathos, and fact, he must go straight to the utmost crown of night: find his way through the imagination or perhaps to the imagination. He might escape from fact but he would only arrive at another nothingness, another nakedness, the limitation of thought. It is not, then, a

matter of eluding human pathos, human dependence. Thought is part of these, the imagination is part of these, and they are part of thought and of imagination. In short, a man with a taste for Meursault, and lobster Bombay, who has a sensible sister and who, for himself, thinks to the very material of his mind, doesn't have much choice about yielding to "the complicate, the amassing harmony." (L 444–45)

The Canon learns that exclusive devotion to either fact or imagination leads equally to nothingness, hence that neither should be used to elude the other; rather he must recognize their interdependence, and thus integrate them.

We find that the meanings of the Canon and his sister depend on the meanings of major man and the MacCullough. We meet the Canon in the first stanza of III.v, but the lyrical episode that begins there has a structural antecedent in I.ix:

The romantic intoning, the declaimed clairvoyance
Are parts of apotheosis, appropriate
And of its nature, the idiom thereof.

They differ from reason's click-clack. . . .
But apotheosis is not
The origin of the major man. He comes, . . .

from reason, . . .
the object of

The hum of thoughts evaded in the mind,
Hidden from other thoughts, he that reposes
On a breast forever precious for that touch. . . . (335)

This is the same scheme as that appearing in III.v immediately following the Canon's meal: the contrast of declaiming with a hum of thoughts about something hidden. Seeing this doubling, we infer that III.v returns to the subject of apotheosis and the major man. The hidden daughters in the second instance of the scheme correspond to the object hidden from thought in the first, which seems to be major man, coming from reason.

Before canto I.ix, major man is associated with a pure or full-blooded sensing of the world, but the speaker wonders how and how far people can seek to know it. I.vi develops links from weather to giant to bloodedness to thought; and I.viii links the MacCullough to major man to the giant. Canto iv establishes the metaphor of perception as painting; canto vi begins with this metaphor and describes a painting of weather and builds up to the final lines, "The weather and the giant of the weather, / Say the

weather, the mere weather, the mere air: / An abstraction blooded, as a man by thought" (333). The apposition of these lines makes the giant of the weather the "mere" or pure weather seen thoughtfully. This giant is in both the weather and the man: the man becomes a giant by his thought, and the thoughtfulness is constituted by "An abstraction blooded"—a personification, the sense we have of the weather as a unified being of human consciousness. The metaphor of "bleeding" looks back to canto iii, where its source is the poem that "refreshes life," gives us the "candor," openness or radiance, that "is the strong exhilaration / Of what we feel from what we think, of thought / Beating in the heart, as if blood newly came, / An elixir, an excitation, a pure power" (330–31). The identification of thought with blood in excitation is expressed in the giant materializing in/out of the weather ("precipitating" we might say) and the abstraction materializing in thought. Image-schematically, both imply a moving fluid filling empty shapes to become solid and forceful. This pattern coheres with sexual arousal, an important aspect in the later symbolism of the series of marriages.

Cantos vii and viii maintain but loosen the focus on making thought forceful by embodiment, wondering if the giant is superfluous: "It feels good as it is without the giant, / A thinker of the first idea" (333); "The first idea is an imagined thing. / The pensive giant prone in violet space / May be the MacCullough, an expedient" (334). We should not project gods as causal forces; we can recognize that we are the sources of personifications, rather than imagining them as our father-like creators. This creates new problems: we are uncertain how we may embody or be inspired by the personification, or whether we have any meaningful relation to it: "But the MacCullough is MacCullough. / It does not follow that major man is man" (334). Stevens comments:

MacCullough is any name, any man. The trouble with humanism is that man as God remains man, but there is an extension of man, the leaner being, in fiction, a possibly more than human human, a composite human. The act of recognizing him is the act of this leaner being moving in on us. (L 434)

They say that, in Ireland, God is a member of the family and that they treat Him as one of them. For the mass of people, it is certain that humanism would do just as well as anything else. . . . The chief defect of humanism is that it concerns human beings. Between humanism and something else, it might be possible to create an acceptable fiction. (L 448–49)

MacCullough is the humanist "god," and although Stevens says it is "any name" because it can mean any man, that does not mean it is an arbitrary name. I suspect it puns on *macula*, a stain, which evokes by contrast the

theological notion of transcendent purity in the immaculate conception. In Lewis and Short, *Macula* is “a Roman surname,” and like the prefix *Mac-*, meaning “son of,” *macula* connotes earthly origins, appropriate to Stevens’ Anyman.¹⁰ Staining as a human practice of coloring fabric connects to the anthropocentric metaphor of perception as painting, too.

“Major man” is the fictive idea of something between humanism and the “something else” of God—it is needed to correct the distortions in the vision of reality that follow from those ideas. This critique is a fundamental point of the poem, and we should consider it in the image-schematic terms in which it is conceived and expressed. For Stevens, the humanist model that there is a god *in* man entails that god is already *possessed*, that he is *smaller* than man, and that he is only *part* of the human whole. The container-logic of this model removes the impetus for imaginative motion *out of or over* the human: in existential terms, it leaves us nothing for which to hope, aim, and strive. Having also rejected the religious conception of God as wholly *outside* man, Stevens tries to express an ideal as both inside and outside, neither projection nor introjection but acknowledged projection, as the Supreme Fiction is to be. Hence he speaks of an *extension* of man that is *leaner* and *moves in* on him to become a *composite*. Image-schematically, an extension of something projects its substance outside its original boundaries without losing touch with it, creating a continuum from inside to outside. It is leaner because substances become leaner when they are extended, but also because it is a new conception resulting from the stripping-away of old conceptions viewed as accreted substance (paint, fabric, etc.). Recognizing the extension as both part of the self’s substance and separate from it allows the extension to “approach nearer” to the self, as it is partly identical with it. Then the extension can reconnect with its substance and create a composite (in a kind of feedback loop, “fulfilling itself”).

Concluding that there is no certainty that we can turn the MacCullough into major man by placing him in a prefabricated edifice, Stevens turns him out of doors in the second half of canto I.viii, saying he might be the ideal singer of the sea. Cook senses depths she has not tapped:

He is unobtrusively insistent about lying in this canto: the giant is prone, doubles are latent in the word, MacCullough lay lounging by the sea. The memory of Whitman’s “loafing” is insufficient explanation, and I cannot read fully. But there is some play with proneness, latency, and lying that I think we should connect with the mysterious hiddenness of major man in canto ix. (*Poetry* 230)

The humanist MacCullough’s prone lounging is flexible, relaxed, receptive to inspiration from nature and reality, and to joining with it—ready, if not exactly waiting, for a “leaner being” to move in. All this easy loafing

marks one of several kinds of image-schematic and thematic contrast with the standing-out of those who are rigidified from within because of firm unimaginitive belief about what is without, refusing to accept change or new creation in mental constructs of world and self.

Image-schemas linked with the sister connote this kind of unimaginitive, unchanging belief: stasis, shelteredness, straightness, and rigidity:

Then the Canon Aspirin declaimed
Of his sister, in what a sensible ecstasy

She lived in her house. She had two daughters, one
Of four, and one of seven, whom she dressed
The way a painter of *pauvred* color paints.

But still she painted them, appropriate to
Their poverty, a gray-blue yellowed out
With ribbon, a rigid statement of them, white,

With Sunday pearls, her widow's gayety.
She hid them under simple names. She held
Them closer to her by rejecting dreams.

The words they spoke were voices that she heard.
She looked at them and saw them as they were
And what she felt fought off the barest phrase.

The Canon Aspirin, having said these things,
Reflected, humming an outline of a fugue
Of praise, a conjugation done by choirs.

Yet when her children slept, his sister herself
Demanded of sleep, in the excitements of silence
Only the unmuddled self of sleep, for them. (347–48)

Stevens' neologism "*pauvred*" seems to mean perceptual austerity as an artistic principle. It recalls the word he uses of a "stern" artist, in contrasting "the 'appauvrissement' of a theorist grown abstract with age" with the "abundance" of youth, "full of the exquisite, the delicate, the tender," "delighted with a posture, a piece of cloth, a tree" (*L* 607–08). Such poverty is a late phase, purified of lavish and expressive concrete images. These tercets echo the description of the weather painting by Franz Hals in *I.vi*, but with ironic modulation. Where Hals seems a little too abundant and "brushy," the sister is a little too *pauvred*. Her austerity is a projection, too: partly false, imposed for the sake of her clarity, but hiding what is youthful and changing. She paints her daughters "still" and

“rigid” (a “still life” or *nature morte* painter). Other etymologies relating to her actions evoke stasis. “Dressed,” from Latin *directus*, means to make straight or right. “Statement” is related to words such as “stasis” and “statue.”

Canto I.ii speaks of “desire at the end of winter, when / It observes the effortless weather turning blue. . . . It knows that what it has is what is not / And throws it away like a thing of another time, / As morning throws off stale moonlight and shabby sleep” (330). We think of a layer of snow melting as bedsheets and a shroud of sleep being thrown off. In III.v, the sister is opposite, holding things closer instead of throwing them away, placing covers instead of removing them, rejecting metamorphosis and metaphor by rejecting dreams and movement. This dovetails with Stevens’ mapping of fictions as solid structures like buildings and statues, since they are freestanding, strong and unbending, to “support” people and to “cover” and protect them.¹¹ The sister’s “sensible ecstasy” sounds paradoxical. We may first read “reasonable bliss,” then detect “perceptual/perceptible standing-out,” which hints at madness. Ec-stasy’s Latin roots contrast with staying in, but to live in her house thus is to be completely immersed in her projections. This ecstasy is variously “sensible”: accepting her fiction solidifies it, and she feels through it strongly because she sees with it.

Some meanings line up and overlap through etymological echoes. The canto plays with the tension between standing still and inside, and moving out; the silence/speech contrast is parallel. “House,” “hid,” and “hidden” may come from the same root. So the sister in her house is like the daughters under simple names, hidden under coverings. Figuratively, “roof” (I.vi, III.viii) suggests any extreme upper covering, and hence the sky, the vault or firmament of heaven. “Closelier” is a neologism with an implied sense of “more closely.” “Closely” can mean with closed lips, inarticulately; secretly, privately; as well as in a place with no inlet or outlet; or in close proximity (the Latin root means closed, shut). Sunday is the Sabbath, the day of rest on which God contemplated his creation. The sister is a “widow” because for Stevens the divine groom is dead. “Widow” comes from *vidua*, divided, i.e., from a husband (“Catawba” also means “divided” [Cook, *Poetry* 252]), and the image schema of division is another that governs her character. She resists change by insisting on division. As a female offspring, or anything “considered in relation to its source,” a daughter is metaphorically a projection of self, too. She severs her projections from their source in her mind, and so accords them the separateness of physical objects. That the daughters are hidden (covered) and simple (etymologically single, uncompounded, as well as humble and unlettered) reinforces their dividedness.¹²

The Canon is read mainly as a figure for the neo-romantic poet (implicitly, for Stevens) who undertakes a quasi-sacred quest. Harold Bloom notes Stevens’ 1954

Vichian adage “The author of man’s canons is man, / Not some outer patron and imaginer,” where “canon” means human self-definition. . . . [The] name “Aspirin” probably plays upon the archaic meaning of “aspires,” . . . Latin for “breaking upon, desiring, favoring,” and I think we can translate “the Canon Aspirin” as the self-defining, self-describing human desire for a beyond, even if that beyond turns out to be an abyss. (*Climate* 205)

The Canon’s movement to or through imagination—soaring and plunging forward and back involves covering much ground and penetrating surfaces and boundaries—expresses a crisis of faith that is also a crisis of identity: “What am I to believe?” “Is it he or is it I that experience this?” (349).¹³ The Canon aims to envision and identify with major man by doing the opposite of what his sister does. Instead of treating the elements of his vision statically, separating, covering, and putting them to sleep as ontological facts, he uncovers them as mental projections, and seeing them as such enables him to explore them. Reason, the source of major man, is Cartesian, the mind certain of its self-experience, but suspending judgment on the ontological status of its constructs. Imagination then reconstructs from the remains of decreation fresh integrations, made to reveal reality anew. “Crude compoundings” means bringing together what is elementary and ostensibly opposed (“the law of contrast is crude”), but conceptually “kin” (“crude” relates to blood and blood to kin). This is figured as a muscular, masculine enterprise, fuelled by the rush of blood into veins and heart and brain. But the crude contrast with his serious and conservative sister marks an intermediate stage of the dialectic: he must face and incorporate her meaning, if he is to be more than a defiant epicure.

The title “Canon” relies much on the “song” and “rule” senses of Latin *cano*: the outline the poet hums aspires to become both a song or fiction and a principle or way of life (a musical version of the MacCullough’s “habit”). “Fugue” comes from *fuga*, Italian “flight” (related to Latin *fugere* “to flee”), suggesting the canon’s night-flight is the performance fulfilling the outlined composition.¹⁴ “Humming” brings to this complex of associations the booming bees, since both words are connected with Latin *bombus*. The bees are literally mono-tonous in their unchanging buzz, too cyclically repetitive, the aural equivalent of the solidification process and its products, as in “granite monotony.” So the Canon’s humming of fugal praise for his sister prefigures his flight into angel-hood as the booming bees prefigure a new be-coming for the withered scene that “has not changed enough” (337) for the old seraph who presides over it.

The Canon’s triumph is in discovering a new reality in vision by combining parts in his imagination. His fault is that all this exploratory projecting activity interferes with his accurately receiving external impressions. He soon imposes, instead of discovering, his compositions. But he imposes like the fox and snake, who are unlike the earlier animals, lions,

elephants, and bears, in that they represent cunning more than strength, and could not be tamed in circuses. This is “a brave affair” (348) and “brave” here seems also to have a “covering” meaning relating to showy dress, as well as an emotional meaning, just as the sister’s “gayety” means bright clothes as well as joy. But then we are told that discovery must be possible—to find an unexampled real, “unlike” anything in our fictions. The key moment is the crescendo of uncertainty over “Is it he or is it I that experience this?” (349). Then the speaker sees the power to identify with both his angel and himself at once, but in order to do this, a reversal must occur: no longer is the angel’s majesty a fictional consolation for a poor mortal self; rather that majesty fictionally mirrors his own determination, discipline, and sacrifice in his flight’s fugue, its valuable forgetting of everyday illusion and solace and “need’s golden hand” (349). The Canon and his sister are complementary in that the sister is solaced by aspiring to mimic the divine majesty of which she thinks herself a reflection; whereas the Canon is delighted to think divine majesty a reflection of himself.

This is an effective reversal, but there follows a failure of some kind. The Cinderella lines of the intervening tercet are a difficult crux. The speaker asks, “What am I to believe?” and offers in response an imagined scene and further questions, especially the desolate, “These external regions, what do we fill them with / Except reflections . . . ?” Stevens’ letter implies that the Canon’s problem is his lack of choice: his aspiration to include everything becomes a substitute for reality, and his noble intentions a consolation for the self’s failures. His orders become artificial impositions, whereas the later speaker has choice over when and how to name his fluent mundo, and her nature will be discovered, not imposed. Cook responds by focusing on “the kind of question and answer here”:

Stevens does not say, “What do I believe?” And he does not answer with doctrine or with its reverse. . . . The question is not rhetorical. . . . The answer is oblique and fictive, yet nonetheless something of a parable, which is one way of answering questions. (*Poetry* 257)

I think we must read the question as articulating a genuine worry, but I see its deliberately ambiguous phrasing as leaving an opening to deny its pressure. That is, we can construe it as rhetorical, in case no good answer can be found. (At any rate, such nuances of “speaker’s meaning” allow some latitude of interpretation.)

If the sister complements the Canon as faith complements imagination, we should recall what Stevens wrote about the relation between modern man and modern art:

in an age in which disbelief is so profoundly prevalent . . . the arts in general, are, in their measure, a compensation for what

has been lost. Men feel that the imagination is the next greatest power to faith: the reigning prince. Consequently their interest in the imagination and its work is to be regarded not as a phase of humanism but as a vital self-assertion in a world in which nothing but the self remains, if that remains. . . . (748)

Stevens proposes a summing-up of his time that “brings into unity an immense number of details”: “the search for the supreme truth has been a search in reality or through reality or even a search for some supremely acceptable fiction” (749).¹⁵ Especially revealing for us is the passage describing “the unities, the relations, to be summarized as paramount now” (748). They constitute a complex imperative born of the modern artist’s “essential poverty” in feeling the wasting of the faith embodied in the sister:

The extension of the mind beyond the range of the mind, the projection of reality beyond reality, the determination to cover the ground, whatever it may be, the determination not to be confined, the recapture of excitement and intensity of interest, the enlargement of the spirit at every time, in every way . . . (748)

The image-schematic model of a force breaking out of and extending beyond boundaries to enlarge, cover ground, and so recapture what has evaded it, fits, in varying approximations, Stevens’ account of major man, what the MacCullough lacks in lounging, and what the Canon seeks in flight.

Eleanor Cook sees Stevens as going beyond both traditional philological and deconstructive views of paronomasia illuminating or subverting the history of thought, “retrieving from the past what he can, and imagining the possibility of a new mythological form” (*Poetry* 165). She does not exaggerate in suggesting that wordplay has connections to psychology and neurology (“Etymology” 36–37; see Davis et al.), and I think the time is right for criticism to find new perspectives on its subject by conversing with such disciplines on the great questions of language and thought. By doing so, we have uncovered new avenues of investigation into “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” and other works, and more broadly, into wordplay and its connections with other aspects of literature and creativity.

Important but recalcitrant aspects of wordplay are intelligible only by concentrating on imaginative cognition. Thematic concepts have image-schematic aspects, and the argument proceeds by manipulating them. I surmise there exists a continual movement among specific and schematic imagery and the words, sounds, letters, and etyms that evoke them, each sparking leaps to others. Image-schematic projection also creates much of the polysemy that underlies linguistic history, and construing etymological puns means using sound-links within and across languages to unearth

such semantic ore. This kind of analysis is tricky, as its principles are still in their formative years, and literature demands particular analytical flexibility. But it is essential for grasping literary structure and meaning at many scales.

It seems clear too that these imaginative manipulations can help people think through matters that seem intractable when available vocabularies are impoverished or misleading. I think Stevens had inadequate terms for talking about paradoxical relations among modern "reality," "appearance," and "fiction," and about a *tertium quid* "between" or "transcending" the religion-humanism opposition. Only by linking these concepts with images and image schemas was he able to grasp and present their inner structures and external relations in poetymological play, and so formulate his central ideas about supreme fictions.

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Notes

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¹ This paper was largely inspired by Eleanor Cook's *Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War in Wallace Stevens*. See also her "Riddles" and the series of exchanges in the journal *Connotations*: Cook ("Etymology"), Hecht, Brogan, Rosu, Bahti, Hollander ("Note"), and Cook ("Paronomasia"). "Etymology" and "Riddles" are reprinted in *Against Coercion*. Ruthven, and Keyser and Prince examine folk etymology and how it interacts with other forms of wordplay. J. Hillis Miller offers a deconstructive view of etymological play. Important studies of puns include Culler ed., Frye, and Redfern. I suspect that what Litz said in 1993 about the "playing field" of commentary on "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" having "tilted toward the newer historicists" (162) remains true today. Studies of Stevens' relation to literary traditions were more common a few decades ago; those of his relations to ideology, history, and society have been more common recently. But Litz's essay links the modernist historical context to Stevens' neo-romanticism and proto-postmodernism, and others in *The Wallace Stevens Journal* likewise show how such themes are partially commensurable. I take it that the close attention to poetic rhetoric embodied in the criticism of Vendler and Cook can only enrich and sharpen analysis of other contexts (though unlike deconstruction it is inclined to see unstable meanings as mercurial or elusive rather than as irreconcilable "aporia"). Paronomastic analysis can become speculative, but it is necessary for construing Stevensian allegory, and hence his interpretation of history. Wordplay is worldplay, as Hollander and Cook say ("Note" 95; "Paronomasia" 101). Without such analysis, efforts to read the poetry's relation to history must become even more speculative.

² Wallace Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 322. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with page number(s) only in parentheses.

³ See Redfern on "Interlingua" generally (164–70), and Cook on Stevens' use of *coup de grâce* (*Poetry* 207). Anthony Hecht notes that Stevens "is often a multi-lingual punster" (201).

⁴ Marie Borroff examines minutely how the compound of vocabulary conveys compounds of style and feeling. Stevens' "pervasive formal bias" ("World" II, 175) leads him to philosophical and religious topics, but this tendency is undercut by his combining Latinate diction with American colloquial and nonsense diction.

⁵ "It is the *mundo* of the imagination in which the imaginative man delights and not the gaunt world of the reason" (679). Vendler suggests "the Spanish 'mundo' harks back to the quasi-Spanish primitivism of the *Blue Guitar*" (*Extended* 203).

⁶ Cook (*Poetry*) and Masel discuss the book of Revelation in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." Frederick Ahl shows how surprisingly important are puns and other forms of wordplay in ancient poetic and philosophical texts. Culler comments on the role of puns in "central, formative structures of major conceptual systems" such as religion, as in Christ's pun on Peter as the rock (*Petros*) on which he will found his church (15). Ruthven indicates a comparable role for real and folk etymologizing. Revelation also puns on *lapide* as both linen (the clothing of angels) and stone (the Jasper walls of the city). We think of the Canon's "lapis-haunted air" (349), haunted with fictional spirits that may stay natural, warming and clothing and ornamenting, or may solidify into institutional stone. My discussion of Stevens' use of the Vulgate is much indebted to Dieter Goebel's on-line Latin/English parallel Bible.

⁷ The idea that concrete images or geometrical forms are the atoms of language and create abstract and complex concepts through metaphor and combination is not new. But it has only recently been developed into a research program. Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* first set out the "conceptual theory of metaphor" in 1980. The second edition's afterword (2003) updates the theory. Johnson's *The Body in the Mind* analyzes image schemas directly and shows how they operate in experience, linguistic meaning, and reasoning. Lakoff and Johnson's *Philosophy in the Flesh* describes the role of metaphor in reason and philosophy. Lakoff examines their role in polysemy and folk etymology in *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*. Eve Sweetser demonstrates image-schematic metaphor at work in etymology and polysemy. Beate Hampe's collection *From Perception to Meaning* presents current views and debates. In trying to capture Stevens' very complex and elusive play, I treat image schemas more loosely and flexibly than do these more technical studies. Lakoff and Turner examine poetic metaphor in *More Than Cool Reason*. See also Turner's *Death Is the Mother of Beauty, Reading Minds, and The Literary Mind*. Alan Richardson's website *Literature, Cognition & the Brain* is the best on-line resource for flourishing research connecting all areas of poetics and criticism to cognitive science and linguistics. See also recent introductions by Stockwell, Hogan, Gavins and Steen, and Semino and Culpeper. Nicholson's "Reading" and "The Riddle" use cognitive research to examine the "logic of visualization" in Stevens' images and riddles.

⁸ Lakoff and Turner respond in the negative to the question, "Can Anything Be Anything?" in *More Than Cool Reason* (199 ff.). They propose an "Invariance Hypothesis" that metaphor is constrained to "preserve the image-schematic structure of the target, and import as much image-schematic structure from the source as is consistent with that preservation" (Turner, "Aspects" 254). Both later absorb this principle into broader theories—Turner into his and Fauconnier's conceptual blending theory (see *The Way We Think* and Turner's website); Lakoff into the "Neural Theory of Language" (see the 2003 "Afterword" to *Metaphors*).

⁹ Stevens' best critics agree that the Canon Aspirin cantos are central to "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" but they are split over basic meaning—even basic tone. For Harold Bloom, "Stevens is able to gather together, in an astonishing splendor of integration, all the major themes of Romantic poetry" ("Commentary" 77). The dialectic in these cantos consists in "the Canon's quest toward an integration of all reality, fact and thought together"; then "the Canon's surrender of his quest to the angelic

impatience that imposes rather than discovers order"; then the synthesis ("which one does not hesitate to call Stevens' finest poem"), "where the poet's discovery of reality is both given and celebrated" (92). For Helen Vendler, this is "a remarkable sequence which aims at bringing the whole edifice to perfection in a complex reconciliation of tones," but it is preceded by "the most desperate moment in the whole poem," and "after a heroic expansion, [the canto] turns despairingly on the mind's ramifying extrapolations and evasions, and ends in disgust" (*Extended* 197–98). The dispute indicates what is at issue and at stake, and it has had extraordinary longevity, shaping discussion and receiving regular citational nods—for example from Bornstein in 1977 (20) to Longenbach in 1991 (265), although both take a middle path between the disputants.

¹⁰ Cook comments on Bishop's, Stevens', and Eliot's play with *macula* ("Etymology" 40–42). It is among the words "that require etymological or paronomastic awareness when we read twentieth-century poetry" (40). Morrison notes that "Strictly speaking, the 'immaculate conception' refers to the virgin birth of Mary, not Christ or the 'son,'" but focuses on Stevens' play with the "popular misuse" of the expression (26 n 4).

¹¹ Stevens is elaborating on conventional metaphors of both faith and God as buildings. Cook links the "castle-fortress-home" of l.viii (334) with *château* and with Luther's God as "mighty fortress" ("ein fester Burg ist unser Gott") (*Poetry* 228). Perhaps the identification also motivates the choice of Henry Church as the dedicatee of the poem—a playful notion of the church personified. The opening lyric may be Stevens' modern version of church as a living experience of a passing moment of intimate community, clarity, and rest within the circle of a supreme fiction.

¹² Cook remarks that "no one as yet has solved the riddle of the Canon's sister. This mysterious canto is a trap for the unwary, inviting allegoresis but so far resisting our intelligence quite successfully" (*Poetry* 254). I think there is a case to be made for unriddling the sister as "faith," reading a pun on the Latin *sistere*, a formation of *stare*, meaning to stand, a common metaphor for faith, confidence, and belief. As offspring of faith, the daughters could be named "hope" and "charity" (four and seven letters, in Latin as well—*spes* and *caritas*).

¹³ The Canon's identification with the seraph is connected with anagrammatic transformation, of new vision into new being ("he *was* the ascending wings he *saw*"), and into new speech ("seraph" into "phrase"). Cook shows the importance of anagram in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," for example (*Poetry* 290), where lemon trees are elm trees, " 'But folded over, turned round.' It was the same, / Except for the adjectives, an alteration / Of words that was a change of nature" (415). Cf. Ahl 26–43.

¹⁴ Oxford notes a secondary psychological meaning, a "flight from one's own identity, often involving travel to some unconsciously desired locality" in "reaction to shock or emotional stress."

¹⁵ Thus the arts approach religion, and Simone Weil's idea of decreation, "making pass from the created to the uncreated," leads to the claim that "Modern reality is a reality of decreation, in which our revelations are not the revelations of belief, but the precious portents of our own powers" (750). The identification of the Canon with this project appears in Stevens' application of two words strongly linked with him, "sophistication" and "aspiration," to the poets and painters involved in decreative self-revelation. After declaiming the imperative of expansion, he writes, "It is possible to be subjected to a lofty purpose and not to know it. But I think that most men of any degree of sophistication, most poets, most painters know it" (748). After declaiming the modern artist's decreative search, he writes, "I am elevating this a little, because I am trying to generalize and because it is incredible that one should speak of the aspirations of the last two or three generations without a degree of elevation" (751).

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Poems

Nothing

. . . *the nothing that is.*
—Wallace Stevens

A man who loves his wife too ardently—
Jerome argued in the fourth century—
That man is guilty of adultery.

I knew someone who hid outside his house,
Crouched in the webbed & berried shrubbery,
To watch his wife's nocturnal ritual:

The slow unbuttoning of her earthly
Garments, the shucking off of mortal guise,
Then thinning to vapor before his gaze.

He wept among the multitude of moths.
To love is to suffer, et cetera,
But suffering teaches how we are loved—

That wife stepped naked into starry fall
And whispered forth her husband's name until
He followed the gauzy braid of her breath

To clasp nothing that made him less alone.

Michael Waters
Salisbury, Md.

Love in the Middle of Night

Even these red-winged winds,
Flying upon themselves, cannot end
The most human whisper heard
Dancing in our chosen words.
And the music of its muttered will
Refuses our desire to be still—
To be a frozen extension of the quiet
Lulling hour in the night's violet
Hush. Now is the time for us.
Our tribute to the moment must
Become its own perfect statue,
A sculpted search for a truth,
For the indefinable utterance
That more than circles chance
And more than dances on the wind,
But is dance itself, is red-winged wind,
And is the will behind each whisper—
Until not even the idea of night is heard.

Dirk Fearing
Cambridge, Mass.

A Circle and a Square Dancing

The space is music enough. There is no song
Here, where the two shapes dance
Toward ordered air. Or, shall we say,
They do not dance, but are an image of dance.
The square says: "I'm not sure how to hold you."
"Just put your arms around me," the circle replies.
Wresting against and toward its angular being,
The square can only muster up an octagon.
The music becomes a more unified shape,
No longer a lovely war in the mind's ear.

Dirk Fearing
Cambridge, Mass.

Reviews

Luminous Traversing: Wallace Stevens and the American Sublime.

By Jacek Gutorow. Opole, Poland: Uniwersytat Opolski Press, 2007.

The Polish poet and scholar Jacek Gutorow, who describes his own poetry as an attempt *which fails* to attain the sublime, has chosen a difficult enterprise. His post-Kantian analysis of the American sublime in the poetry of Wallace Stevens encompasses the ways in which Stevens uses both the European and the American traditions of the sublime, whose history he carefully traces, as well as the subtle alterations by which Stevens transgresses them in order to adapt them to his own poetic vision. Gutorow defines the poetic vision of Stevens as "his sublime fascination with the imperfect and flawed" (195) and perceives the poet's need to represent the full spectrum of human existence with all of its inherent contradictions. His observations lead him to conclude that Stevens is a tentative poet who recognizes the fact that the mind cannot attain the sublime, yet seeks nonetheless to approach it. For Gutorow, the quest of Stevens marks him as "a founding myth" of American modernity: "The greatness of Wallace Stevens lies in the fact that he was the first to notice how the poetic and existential dilemmas add up to a sense of mystery which permeates our existence" (195).

The book's title of "luminous traversing" has its source in a passage from "The Comedian as the Letter C," in which the failed poet Crispin takes on yet one more new form: "He was a man made vivid by the sea / A man come out of luminous traversing" (CPP 24). Gutorow feels that the principal interest of Stevens, as evidenced by the constant ironic reshaping of Crispin, is to be found in his preference for continual transformations, a poetic process that can only be a means to an end and is not an end in itself: "Thus it was rather the process and joy of transformation, and not the final form, that interested the poet" (194). The creation of a sublime sense of final form capable of transcending the world and of representing it as a whole was a poetic possibility that Stevens certainly considered in his poem "The American Sublime" and later used as a point of reference in "Esthétique du Mal," but one he ultimately chose to put aside in favor of what Gutorow calls his "preference for Protean transformations" (194).

Gutorow perceives an affinity in the use of the sublime in the poems of Stevens and those of Elizabeth Bishop. He feels that Elizabeth Bishop's poem "The Imaginary Iceberg," from *North and South* (1946), in which she opposes the grandeur and the sublime setting of the iceberg with the Brechtian alienation of the speaker from it, is a good analogy with which to compare the opposition in Stevens between the desire for the sublime and the impossibility of reaching it: "This is the transition along a route characterized by one common trait, a sense of sublimity which permeates the act of the mind and clashes it against the fact of the world. As a result, we get the poem that is ever-elaborating, ironic and ambiguous in its attempts to describe 'things as they are' while they are being transformed by the observing eye" (196). If such a thing were

possible, this would be the place to indicate the multiplicity of Gutorow's systematic cross-references to both the American and European traditions of the sublime, to distinguished critics of Stevens, and to contemporary poets. The comparisons with Eliot are especially enlightening, which inform his own arguments, but they are so numerous that not all of them can be mentioned here.

Incessant transformations that are both ironic and ambivalent involve repeated moments of negation in the poetic intervals before one form can take on the shape of another. Gutorow feels that the transformations presented a danger for Stevens, whose fascination with the incomplete and distorted nature of existence could have ended in the impasse of abandonment and despair: "he had rejected traditional notions of humanism, religion, and metaphysics, and finally found himself in the state of suspension and detachment from any metaphysical and religious exegeses of reality" (127). Gutorow believes that Stevens sought in his readings of philosophy the means by which to avoid the impasse and he examines the influence of Nietzsche, whom Stevens was reading in 1942 when he "was in the course of revising and reformulating the tenants of his aesthetics" (114). Realizing that it is necessary to come to terms with the obscurity of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," Gutorow introduces Krzysztof Ziarek's use of a Heideggerian vocabulary in order to explain more precisely how Stevens was attempting to redefine humanism at the time.

It is in his treatment of French philosophers who approached the sublime, especially Simone Weil, that Gutorow finds the heart of his subject. Weil's concept of decreation, which Stevens indicates he found in Gustav Thibon's 1948 selection of her work *La Pesanteur et La Grâce* and translated as "making pass from the created to the uncreated" was essential, according to Gutorow. He believes that the tentativeness in the poetry of Stevens is mirrored by Weil's atheism: "Weil's defense of atheism and negativity paralleled Stevens' strategy of poetic, epistemological, and indeed existential, avoidance and indeterminacy. For Weil, atheism was a moment of purification of the mind and thus possessed a positive potential" (127).

Gutorow feels that Stevens is using Weil's concept of decreation to support what he had discovered in his own practice of poetry when he quotes her to conclude the 1951 essay "The Relations Between Poetry and Painting," but that her concept, standing as it does at the end of *The Necessary Angel*, has a tremendous importance. In his conclusion, Stevens emphasizes his recognition of the positive nature of his poetic discourse. He makes the distinction between "decreation" as understood by Weil, "making pass from the created to the uncreated," which he considers to be a positive force, and her term of "destruction," or total negation, which Stevens translates as "making pass from the created to nothingness" before clearly defining his own conception: "Modern reality is a reality of decreation" (*CPP* 750). Although Gutorow doubts that Weil would have been willing to describe modern reality as a reality of decreation, he thinks that Stevens does make a logical statement in the light of the discussion in the essay on the relation between modern art and his own poetry.

Gutorow's interpretation of decreation in Stevens, an interpretation that he feels he shares with Joseph N. Riddel as an element capable of reshaping

form, brings him to a new conception of the American sublime. He considers decreation as it is understood by Stevens to be a force that has broken its mould but which, for that very reason, is a dynamic source of creative energy: "The implications arising from the emergence of the term are more ambiguous, of course, because decreation is also the shattering of its framework and it is precisely this ambiguity and indeterminacy that marks the sublime mode in Stevens" (128). For Gutorow, the sublime no longer stands alone as a noun but has become an adjective to describe a mode of creation, one that does attempt to attain a single form, but one that is capable of producing an infinite number of new shapes and structures.

Gutorow is careful to point out that in the essay "The Relations Between Poetry and Painting" Stevens treats post-impressionist and abstract painting and refers to a French tradition that begins with Baudelaire and continues through Mallarmé and Valéry. Jean-François Lyotard, a contemporary disciple of Mallarmé and Valéry, believed that the meaning of an abstract painting "lies precisely in its negativity, (i.e. unwillingness to represent anything) as the latter has an access to that which is but potential and still unidentified" (128). Gutorow's notes and extensive bibliography are especially helpful here, for while Lyotard's afterword to the English translation of *The Postmodern Condition* (1989) is well known, access to Jean-Luc Nancy's "L'Offrande Sublime" (1993) and to Jacob Rogozinsky's "Le don du monde" (1993), whom he also mentions, is more limited. Gutorow also suggests reading the Danish critic Kasper Nefer Olsen's "Anesthétique : Le sublime expliqué aux amants" (1993) as well as "Sublime Modes of Presentation" (1999) by the Polish critic Marc Oziewicz. It is to be hoped that Gutorow has a sequel in mind for *Luminous Traversing*, in which he would explore more fully the modern sublime, for "the abstract sets free the imaginative and the fanciful and it crosses the limits of traditional metaphysics and humanism" (129).

Choosing to transform the world in his poetry rather than to transcend it, Wallace Stevens brought poetic practice more fully and completely into the realm of modernity. Gutorow feels that Stevens' poem "The Auroras of Autumn" is best described by Jacques Derrida's conclusion to *The Truth in Painting*: "the imagination gains what it loses. It gains by losing" (129). By insisting that "questions of negative and abstract presentation are strictly related to the sublime mode of thinking," *Luminous Traversing* emphasizes the importance of what Gutorow defines as the "radically sublime"—the poetic mode that Stevens was able to develop in the volume *Transport to Summer* and in the poem "The Auroras of Autumn" before he read Simone Weil—for this constitutes "the dark narrative of a personal apocalypse" (130). The title "Luminous Traversing" that had its origin in the submerged ironies of Crispin's ironic metamorphosis is itself transformed at the end of Gutorow's critical narrative on Stevens to suggest the full power of passing from the created to the uncreated: the moments of illumination in *Transport to Summer's* proliferation of abundant images and in *The Auroras of Autumn's* fiery skies.

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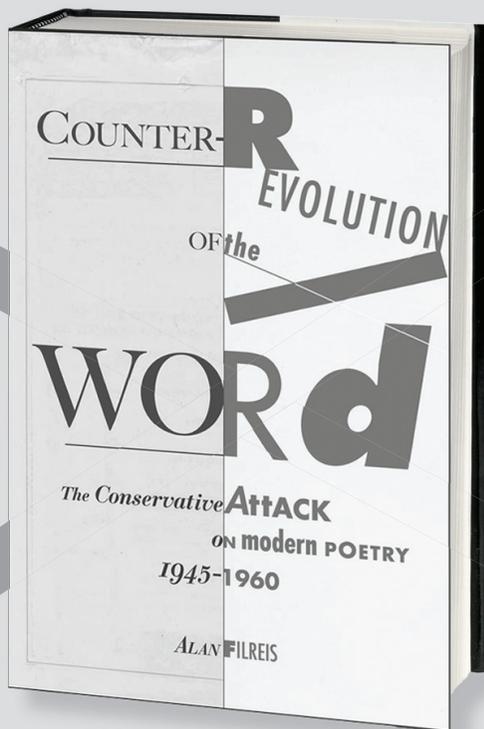
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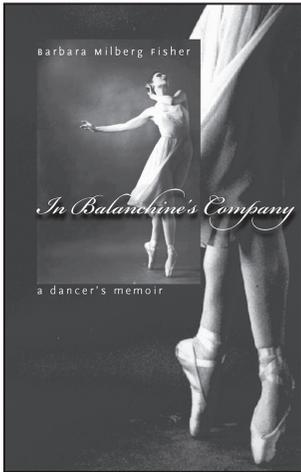
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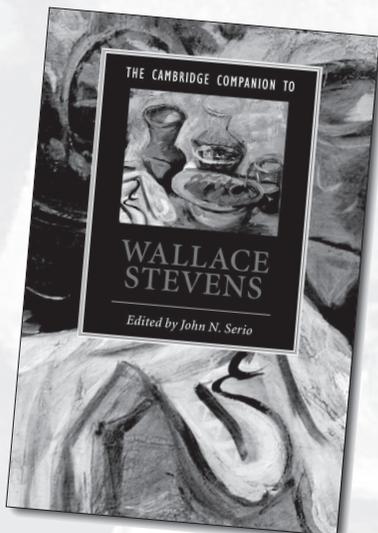
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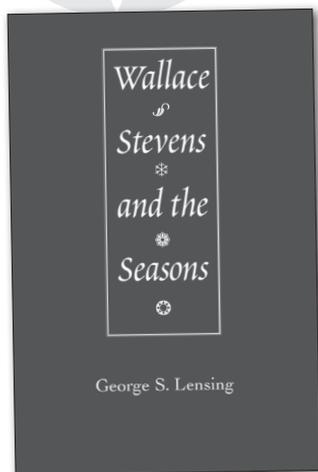
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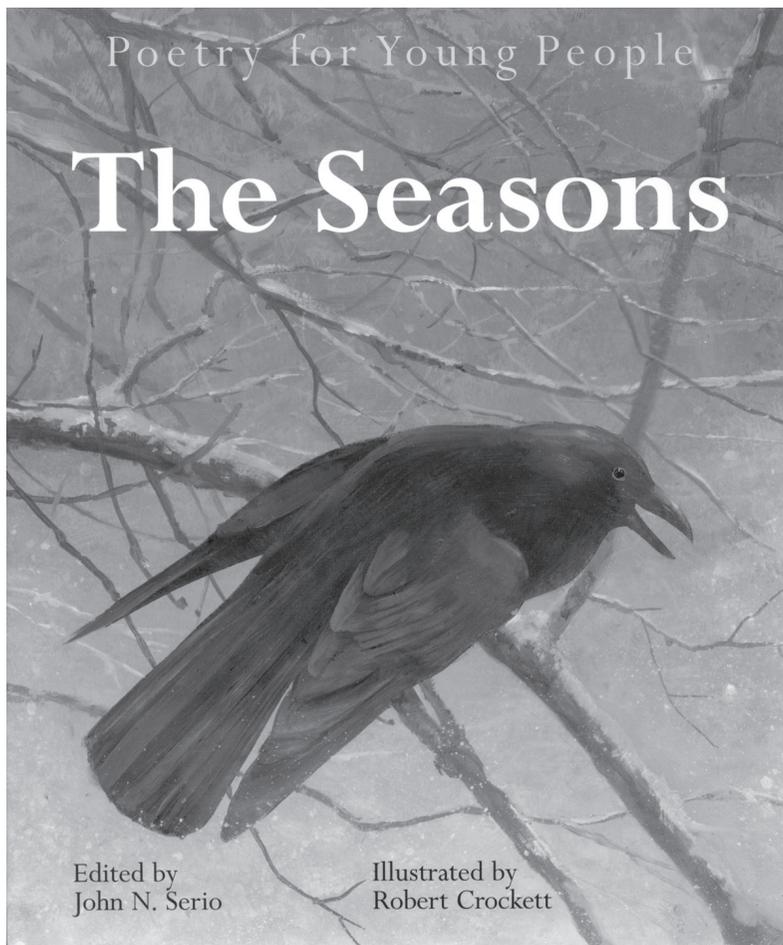
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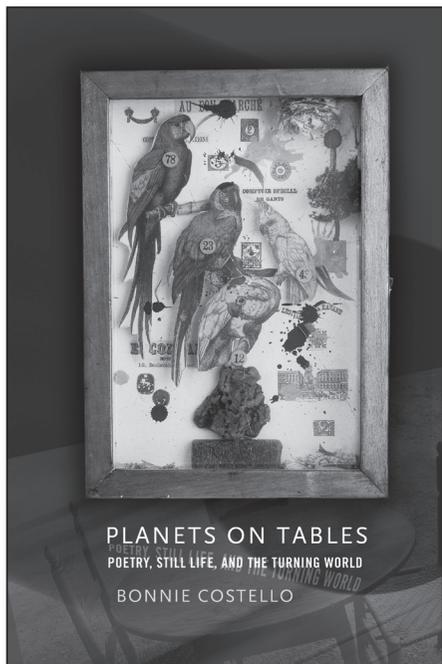
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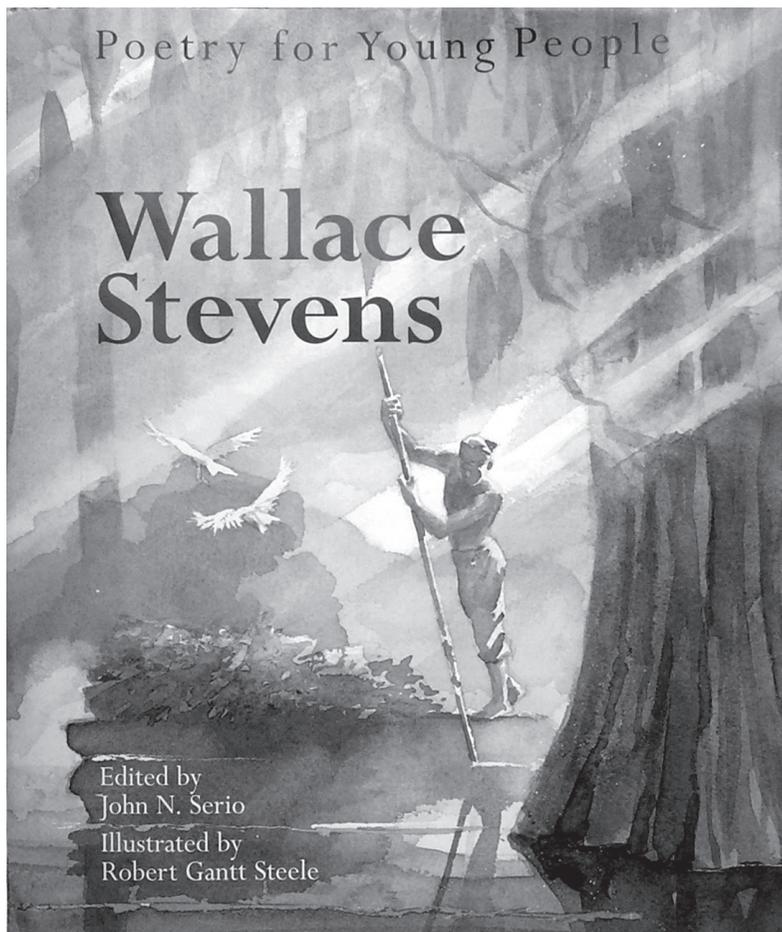
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