

The Wallace Stevens Journal



Special Issue
Stevens and France

A Publication of The Wallace Stevens Society, Inc.

Volume 32

Number 2

Fall 2008

The Wallace Stevens Journal

Volume 32

Number 2

Fall 2008

Special Issue: Stevens and France

Edited by Anne Luyat

Contents

Introduction	—Anne Luyat	147
PHILOSOPHICAL AND THEORETICAL CONCERNS		
Why “Angel Surrounded by Paysans” Concludes <i>The Auroras of Autumn</i>	—Charles Altieri	151
The Moment of a Bird’s Cry: A Note on Wallace Stevens and Simone Weil	—Jacek Gutorow	171
Pure Poetry, Ideas of Order, and the Problem of Poetic Solitude	—Benjamin Johnson	181
Notes Toward a Deleuzian Reading of <i>Transport to Summer</i>	—Axel Nesme	206
THE FRENCH CONNECTION		
Two Parisians <i>Qui Font Fi des Joliesses Banales?</i> Wallace Stevens’ Friendship with the Vidal Family	—Bart Eeckhout	223
THE MUSIC OF LANGUAGE		
The Whispering Troubadour and the Interior Paramour: Courtly Love in Wallace Stevens	—Aurore Clavier	243
Poetics of Variation: Wallace Stevens’ and Paul Valéry’s Poems of the Sea	—Lisa Goldfarb	256
“ <i>Chez moi</i> ”: Stevens at Home in the French Language	—Juliette Utard	275
AFTERWORD		
Wallace Stevens and France: The Twilight after the Lecture	—Robert Rehder	283
Poems		291
Reviews		295
News and Comments		304

Cover

Wallace Stevens in France

Kathryn Jacobi

The Wallace Stevens Journal

EDITOR

John N. Serio

POETRY EDITOR

Joseph Duemer

ART EDITOR

Kathryn Jacobi

BOOK REVIEW EDITOR

George S. Lensing

EDITORIAL ASSISTANTS

William H. Duryea

Maureen Kravec

Faye A. Serio

EDITORIAL BOARD

Milton J. Bates

Jacqueline V. Brogan

Robert Buttel

Eleanor Cook

Bart Eeckhout

Alan Filreis

B. J. Leggett

George S. Lensing

James Longenbach

Glen MacLeod

Marjorie Perloff

Joan Richardson

Melita Schaum

Lisa M. Steinman

TECHNICAL ASSISTANT

Jeff Rhoades

The Wallace Stevens Society, Inc.

PRESIDENT

John N. Serio

ADVISORY BOARD

Milton J. Bates

Robert Buttel

Joseph Duemer

George S. Lensing

Owen E. Brady

David M. Craig

Kathryn Jacobi

Glen MacLeod

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

The subscription rate for individuals, both domestic and foreign, is \$30 for one year or \$50 for two years and includes membership in the Wallace Stevens Society. Rates for institutions are \$40 per year domestic and \$50 per year foreign. Back issues are available. Also available are volumes 1–25 on text-searchable CD-ROM.

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

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

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



Introduction

ANNE LUYAT

WALLACE STEVENS AND FRANCE is a collective attempt to better understand Wallace Stevens' enigmatic statement in the closing lines of "It Must Give Pleasure" at the end of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." Composed in four months during wartime between January 28 and June 1, 1942, the poem places the Sorbonne, which was then under the rule of the Nazi-controlled Vichy government, at the heart of human intellectual endeavor:

They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne.
We shall return at twilight from the lecture
Pleased that the irrational is rational. . . .¹

Closure of the poem is replaced by a prophecy that projects an indefinite future but a definite place—the Sorbonne—in which the philosophical concepts of the rational and the irrational will at last be *gotten straight*. The familiar American colloquialism seems caught in a jocular clash with the reputed elegance of language at the Sorbonne, but the linguistic impertinence brings Stevens into direct contact with the French university during its wartime crisis, when professors of foreign origin, many of whom were philosophers, had been dismissed from its faculty by the Vichy government.

Stevens' prophecy was fulfilled more rapidly than he could have expected. The first person to indicate that "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" had given him pleasure—in a letter sent to Stevens' friend Henry Church that Church had forwarded to Stevens in December 1942—was the exiled French philosopher and poet from the Sorbonne, Jean Wahl. Although Stevens could not have foreseen that Wahl would experience the hoped-for sense of pleasure in reading the poem, he was delighted. When he returned Jean Wahl's letter to Henry Church, Stevens expressed his gratitude by using a French word that includes the notions of joy, happiness, and satisfaction to assure Church that Wahl's understanding meant a great deal to him: "Jean Wahl's letter (which I enclose) says one thing that I like more than anything else, and that is that it gave him pleasure to read the NOTES. . . . Now, to give pleasure to an intelligent man, by this sort of

thing, is as much as one can expect; and certainly I am most *content*, in the French sense of that word, to have pleased Jean Wahl" (L 429–30).

Jean Wahl was not the only French academic in exile. When the Vichy government dismissed "persons of foreign origin" from French universities in May 1941, more than a thousand French academics lost their teaching positions; among their number, one hundred twenty-seven were full professors. The Rockefeller Foundation, counseled by special advisor George Santayana, was able to help fifty of the French professors obtain immigration visas for the United States and to fund teaching positions for them in American universities. The Rockefeller Foundation also sponsored the "New School," also known as the "University in Exile" or the "University of Free France," in New York, which opened its doors on October 8, 1941, and where Jean Wahl gave courses in 1942. Stevens may have wished to pay a tribute in his poem to the exiled French academics, many of whom, like Alexandre Koyré and Jacques Maritain, were philosophers (Zolberg 925–29).

When Stevens wrote "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," he expressed a long-held conviction that the primary purpose of creative art was to give pleasure. As early as February 28, 1909, in a letter that discussed poetry and painting, he proclaimed to his fiancée, Elsie Moll, his feelings about the aim of artistic endeavor: "A good painting should give pleasure, like any other work of art. . . . I used to think that I was putting on airs to pretend to like a picture. But I am satisfied now that if it gives me pleasure, I am right in not caring about 'scale,' or 'balance of tones' or anything of the kind" (L 135).

Stevens' continuing ambition, which may seem strange in the somber wartime context, to write poetry that gives pleasure, may have been explained, at least indirectly, by Stevens himself. He underlined in his copy of Henri Focillon's *The Life of Forms in Art* a passage that explains that an artist often chooses, in a crucial historical context, to follow his own direction: "The spiritual instant which is our life does not necessarily coincide with historical urgency. It may indeed contradict it" (79).² The art historian Henri Focillon was the founding president of the University of Free France.

The enigma of what Stevens felt to be the relationship among the Sorbonne, France, philosophy, and the concept of pleasure as an element of the supreme fiction has not so far been fully explicated. Did he really feel more at home in the French language, as he sometimes suggested in letters? Did he believe that in France, the philosophic, aesthetic, and linguistic aspects of his poetry would produce a critical recognition of a deeper and more far reaching kind than he had so far received? For five decades, although he never set foot on French soil, he continued to engage himself in French culture and to perfect the bright edges of the poems he created by interlacing the French language with his own. Quite simply, as Stevens explained, he used French "for the pleasure that it gives" (L 792). The con-

tributors to "Wallace Stevens and France" recreate the spiritual instants that were inspired in Stevens' poetry by the French language, painters, philosophers, and poets. The result is a many faceted mosaic that resembles Stevens' constantly spinning leaf in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," "So that we look at it with pleasure, look. . . ." (350).

University of Avignon
France

Notes

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

²Stevens' marked copy is in the W. E. B. Du Bois Library at the University of Massachusetts.

Works Cited

- Focillon, Henri. *The Life of Forms in Art*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942.
- Stevens, Wallace. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*. Ed. Holly Stevens. New York: Knopf, 1966.
- . *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson. New York: Library of America, 1997.
- Zolberg, Aristide R. "The Ecole Libre at the New School 1941-46." *Social Research* 65.4 (December 1998): 921-51.



Wallace Stevens' framed portrait of *Still Life*, by Pierre Tal-Coat. Courtesy of Peter Hanchak.

Wallace Stevens purchased Pierre Tal-Coat's *Still Life*, which was painted around 1943, from his Parisian agent, Paule Vidal, in 1949. The painting inspired Stevens' poem "Angel Surrounded by Paysans." In a letter to Paule Vidal on October 5, 1949, Stevens writes:

Now that I have had the new picture at home for a few days, it seems almost domesticated. Tal Coat is supposed to be a man of violence but one soon comes accustomed to the present picture. I have even given it a title of my own: *Angel Surrounded by Paysans*. The angel is the Venetian glass bowl on the left with the little spray of leaves in it. The peasants are the terriens, bottles and the glasses that surround it. This title alone tames it as a lump of sugar might tame a lion. (L 649–50)

Why “Angel Surrounded by Paysans” Concludes *The Auroras of Autumn*

CHARLES ALTIERI

I

THIS WILL BE AN EXERCISE in appreciating what Wallace Stevens’ poem “Angel Surrounded by Paysans” enables for the attentive reader’s imagination. The project entails developing two contexts. First, I will elaborate on Stevens’ possible investments in having this poem recast a still life by the French painter Pierre Tal-Coat that he purchased in 1949. We have to ask why Stevens felt the need to transform the genre, especially since he had happily worked in the genre of literary still life on several occasions. How does this poem recognize and adapt Stevens’ sense of Tal-Coat as “A painter finding his way through a period of abstract painting” and so “likely to pick up a certain amount of the metaphysical vision of the day” (L 595)?¹ Second, I am fascinated by Stevens’ choice to have this poem conclude *The Auroras of Autumn* by staging an appearance of “the angel of reality.”² How can this bare little adventure establish a fitting and even imaginatively provocative summary and farewell to the themes of one of the darkest and least playful of Stevens’ books? The two concerns come together because we have to ask why this particular adaptation of a French painting, painted, according to Bruce Lawder, “around 1943” (352) during WWII, has been carefully placed to enhance the effects of the volume taken as a whole.

Even superb critics of Stevens such as James Longenbach have a tendency to see *The Auroras of Autumn* as problematic. He argues that Stevens’ usual effort to assert the “historicity of poetry and the political power of poets” lapses into “an aesthetic . . . of retreat or mere aestheticism” (279). Ironically, Stevens’ investments in buying pictures from France during these years became, for Longenbach, part of his surrender to “a narrow version of what the world ‘as it is’ might be” (279). The poems here are grounded primarily in “the sensual pleasures his income afforded him and the aesthetic pleasures his accumulated capital of poetry could sustain” (279). But such judgments lead us away from the ways in which this volume might struggle with aspects of the aestheticism that Stevens was tempted to embrace.

The Auroras of Autumn as a whole explores various aspects of the dilemmas rendered in “Esthétique du Mal,” a poem clearly important to Stevens for its inability to reconcile the effort to celebrate the aesthetic distance necessary to see the world steadily and see it whole with the worry that this very distance is complicit in one basic form of evil distinctive to modernity. Modern empiricism is based on an ideal of impersonal description that can provide the stability and impartiality of “The eye’s plain version,” “a thing apart” (397). The distance of the aesthetic object is quite different. But readers run the risk of so stressing contemplative states and formal accomplishments that they lose the work’s capacity to provide distinctive modes of felt intimacy with the actual world. One can see *The Auroras of Autumn* as, among other things, a meditation on how aesthetic distance folds into its empiricist antagonist, providing a distinctively modern version of the evil with which the tragic poet must constantly struggle. This volume’s negotiations with “distance” in turn provide a context for what seems the radical shift in focus presented by the lyrics of *The Rock*, the section of late poems Stevens included in *The Collected Poems*. As Helen Vendler puts it, Stevens’ last volume withdraws “from the rhetorical mode in which the tragic perception voices itself” (204) to explore much more intimate lyric stances. Yet, rather than emphasize the achievement of these poems, I want to suggest that they might gain their distinctive concrete abstractness by extending Stevens’ efforts in the previous book to confront tragedy directly.

II

Because the historical chain leading up to “Angel Surrounded by Paysans” is so fascinating, critics have been insufficiently attentive to how the poem works and why that working might matter. The most interesting writing on the poem takes two interrelated tacks—one concerning Stevens’ interest in producing poems that evoke still life painting, and one concerning what Stevens does with the Tal-Coat painting. Representing the first tack, Bonnie Costello concentrates on how the still lifes in *Parts of a World* establish a profound “reconciling of often violent historical formlessness” with “the human need for intimate arrangements” that can have “the force of epiphany” (454). Even “Angel Surrounded by Paysans,” in a much more abstract volume often criticized for its aestheticism, uses the associations of still life as a low genre to retain “the mood if not the substance of still life” (454). The angel, “numen of Tal-Coat’s simple pots and bowls,” “is a figure both of the center and the periphery, the heroic and the common, megalography and rhopography” (477).³

But Costello does not focus on “Angel Surrounded by Paysans,” so we have to ask why this particular abstracting away from still life is the poem’s route to common life. The poem opens with a strange way of staging the angel, since “he” is introduced by his not being visible:

One of the countrymen:

There is

A welcome at the door to which no one comes?

The angel:

I am the angel of reality,
Seen for a moment standing in the door.

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

Or stars that follow me, not to attend,
But, of my being and its knowing, part. (423)

Then the angel turns to defining his own identity in positive terms. Being "one of you" also involves "being and knowing what I am and know." And what he knows is at once comprehensive and enabling:

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

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

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

By repetitions of half-meanings. Am I not,
Myself, only half of a figure of a sort,

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

Apparels of such lightest look that a turn
Of my shoulder and quickly, too quickly, I am
gone? (423)

Alan Filreis, in "Still Life without Substance," begins to answer these questions by reconstructing from Stevens' published and unpublished letters the details of his purchasing the painting, and then Stevens' understanding of what was involved in transposing still life into an allegorical scene. For Filreis the point of the poem is to highlight this abstracting process as an experiment in placing "relation before substance as the basis of similarity" (345). Rather than portray what a painting is about, the poem replicates the painting only "through resemblances of relation" (346). Rather than have poetry imitate what a painter does, Stevens would

have poetry celebrate its powers to define how paintings become valuable for us. He would abstract painting into part-whole relationships and then produce significance for those relations.

The historical details that interest me are in three letters. The first describes how Stevens transforms Tal-Coat's still life into the terms of his poem: "The angel is the Venetian glass bowl on the left with the little spray of leaves in it. The peasants are the terrines, bottles and the glasses that surround it. This title alone tames it as a lump of sugar might tame a lion" (L 650). The second letter makes sense of this language of "taming" because it presents Stevens praising Tal-Coat for his "display of imaginative force: an effort to attain a certain reality purely by way of the artist's own vitality" (L 656). The still life concentrates on the force of an authorial act, especially in the assertive line and color that Stevens manages to transpose into a lyric mode. The third letter interprets the poem interpreting the painting:

[I]n Angel Surrounded by Paysans the angel is the angel of reality. This is clear only if the reader is of the idea that we live in a world of the imagination, in which reality and contact with it are the great blessings. For nine readers out of ten, the necessary angel will appear to be the angel of the imagination and for nine days out of ten that is true, although it is the tenth day that counts. . . . I have been fitted into too many philosophic frames. As a philosopher one is expected to achieve and express one's center. For my own part, I think that the philosophic *permissible* (to use an insurance term) is a great deal different today than it was a generation or two ago. (L 753)

Our task now is to see what Stevens makes in poetry of Tal-Coat's attaining "reality purely by way of the artist's own vitality." Filreis is right that vitality has to be understood as a relational feature of the painting and of the poem. But I think we cannot isolate relations from the substances that make them visible. After all, the angel for Stevens is a figure for reality, not for abstract relatedness. In what can that sense of reality abide, and how does it differ from what an angel of imagination might bring to the scene?

There are two basic aspects of content in the poem—the images of peasants and angel that transfigure the relations in the still life, and the activities of the angel that provide for the painting what Tal-Coat's brushwork does for the vitality of the painting. I have very little to say about the first since Costello seems to me correct in proposing that transforming the still life into a scenic allegory makes explicit the painter's rejection of adornment so that the angel can be allied with the peasants' ways of being and of knowing. But this description entirely avoids the issue of what the angel

adds to the poem, especially by the poet's choice to risk the awkwardness of developing a first person perspective for this character.

The first thing the angel adds is the necessity of introducing into our sense of the real a complex relation between first- and second-order states. The angel expresses the possibility of "being and knowing what I am and know." Therefore, it sharply repudiates equating reality with any sense of fact or description. Instead, the sense of reality depends on the active relation between being, knowing, and willing what one knows. Here Filreis would remind us that the angel can represent such second-order states only because he offers no specific substance. But for me the point is less the fact that the angel has no substance than the dramatic condition presenting the paysans as looking but not seeing anyone at the door. Probably they cannot see the angel because they look for something physical at the door rather than exploring what might change in their awareness of the relation between being and knowing. One might say that the angel is the spirit of Tal-Coat's vitality in the brushwork—a spirit to be found not in the specific details but in the capacity to embrace the details that frame our specific historical situations.

In short, Stevens seems to have defined the angel of reality in sharp opposition to the angel of imagination he characterizes in his letter. In order to help the paysans see the earth again, the angel must clear away the detritus that the imagination has imposed upon it. In order to enable the paysans to feel their world as "reality," the angel must give access not only to the content of the earth but also to the framing of that content. Two lines devoted to sight are followed by five lines devoted to hearing the tragic drone that accompanies all our efforts to give these sights meaning. There is an angel of reality, but it seems inseparable from awareness that our attributions of meaning are always ultimately to be consigned to the dump. The metaphors allowing us to unite being and knowing are also the source of our necessarily tragic awareness that we are the very source of the destruction of what we celebrate.

I have still to address what is probably the most intriguing feature of the poem and certainly its most surprising modification of still life. Why is the poem in the first person, after the introduction by the paysan who opens the door? How else represent this "welcome" to which no one comes? Perhaps only a first person can create an effect of substance even though the poem deals with fleeting feelings—the first person may be that mode of being that gives a home to the insubstantial. Perhaps only the first person can naturalize the question with which the poem concludes, since there the angel worries about what kind of existence it can have, given what it knows. This kind of self-consciousness may be inseparable from the fear that it exists primarily as an "apparition." The repudiation of the earth it inherits under the auspices of used and usurious signs seems to entail this internal instability, as if here the angel felt most forcefully the tragic forces that isolate consciousness from what it would embrace. Notice how

the angel's self-consciousness here occupies a strange future perfect temporality where the present tense "I am gone" is itself knowable only after the departure. (The "I am gone" is more strangely yet cast as a first person expression within a third person point of view, since the angel is probably "gone" only from the perspective of the paysans, although there is a sense that its disappearance is also felt as subjective reality.) It seems that the angel not only knows the effects of tragedy but participates in them: its making reality visible and active depends on its knowing also the sense of mortality that has to frame any possible celebration; otherwise that celebration would collapse again into the imaginary. The angel of reality appears inseparable not just from the spirit of tragedy but also from the self-knowledge that has to recognize the limitations of any human power.

The concluding question is the poem's finest gesture. This angel of reality turns out to need allegory in order to become visible, and then perhaps only as an "apparition." Allegorically, this angel of reality has to recognize how fleeting a sense of reality is. Facts are stable, stable enough to invite angels of imagination. But "reality" is not fact; it is the accommodation of the imagination to those facts. It is the "realization" of fact. That realization depends on combining the intensity of presence with a sense of the lag produced by a self-consciousness that is always afraid that the intensity is caused only by an apparition. No wonder there are repeated doublings such as "liquidly in liquid lingerings," "an apparition appareled in / Apparels," and "quickly, too quickly, I am gone." Beverly Maeder remarks that "quickly, too quickly" creates an odd slowing down or "pause" at the threshold of appearance (165). But she does not recognize how the poem labors here to have the angel take on substance at the very point of its disappearance, as if the angel's accepting that transience were fundamental to the very conditions of its existence.

Now I have to face the basic problem with my own interpretation. Why is it so labored and abstract in relation to so playful a poem? How can we integrate the playfulness into the reading, and perhaps make the lugubriousness of my allegorizing about the allegory a little more dynamic? "[Q]uickly, too quickly, I am gone" comes with its own quickness, surprising the reader with its abrupt finality crossed with a delicate ruefulness—an intriguing combination difficult for criticism to address. Dramatically, this assertion matters because it acknowledges that there can be only momentary satisfactions of our investments in knowing reality.

The real is not substantial, or it might be substantial only if we can adapt to the processes the poem embodies. All of the references to tragedy and to loss in the poem indicate that a sense of reality as presence is inseparable from a sense that the nature of realization is entwined with the nature of loss. Then, meta-dramatically, the poem adds two further considerations—the more telling because they are so playful. First we are invited to notice that this departure is not only a figurative assertion within the poem, but also a literal assertion about the volume: since this is

the concluding poem, so all of the “angelic presences” have to depart after their all too brief presence. This poem about the angel of reality as apparition turns out to be completely adequate as description, at least on one level. For it embodies the virtual condition of our possible identification with the angel. The medium in which the angel can appear literally now disappears. We are left with this instance of the same tragic sense that the angel sees as the precondition of its providing an emblem of realization.

But if we are left with this sense of realization because of the lightness by which the angel handles its disappearance, then perhaps tragedy does not have the last word. This is the second consideration the ending invites. We cannot stop with how the poem realizes loss. In the angel’s disappearance there may be the appearance of the very knowledge that he is to mediate—the knowledge of the relation between what we can see if we destroy the shape of meanings and what we can hear because we recognize the tragic dimension that this shape has come to constitute. Perhaps then, at the ending, the poem itself actually functions as angel—both referring to and becoming a real instance of what can be realized as present when one is prepared to break from one’s defenses and recognize how transient the realization of our values has to be. The lugubrious themes can be treated lightly because there remains a path to the angel based on how it stages its own disappearance. This path invites the reader to accept that transience so fully that all of the reader’s efforts to make the world real can be framed within it. The encounter with loss itself becomes a partially positive condition because it is manifest as the precondition for appreciating how the angel of reality can speak as first person—indeed has to speak as first person because the speaking itself becomes a dance echoing Yeats’s “Among School Children,” where being, appearing, and disappearing are inseparable from one another. As Stevens put it in a slightly different context, “the physical never seems newer than when it is emerging from the metaphysical” (L 595). The lightness of being in this poem celebrates its metaphysical capacity to recuperate the tragic sense and make it a condition for understanding how reality is a matter of subtlety and not substance (see 750). Subtlety is a matter of finding the angel in the very processes of becoming and transforming by which its reality and its powers of de-realization become one state.

Now the back story of how that painting became a poem comes into affective play for those familiar with it. Stevens has transformed a still life into a dramatic scene in order to bring out two aspects of how this poem manifests an angel of reality rather than of the imagination. The first is the poem’s staging of the importance of the maker as manifesting the power to adapt to the world of fact even as it transforms our sense of what contexts are necessary for this sense of realization. The second aspect then is the poem’s capacity to articulate how the painting can be the instrument for eliciting an interpretive language stressing circulation and transformation. Even though the poet has transfigured the still life,

the inspiration it provides offers a means of absorbing the worldliness of still life, so dear to Costello, into figures of the sociality that must provide the frame for such worldliness. The poem offers the angel as the boundary condition of that sociality. The angel expresses the force of what cannot be seen as substance, yet proves the precondition for recognizing how a society might be constituted by this fusion of the sense of the tragic and the sense of presence that this awareness of tragedy makes possible. What better figure of recognizing tragedy and recognizing what the angel can still provide in relation to tragedy than this French painting, from a culture now encountering after the war "something much more tragic than a literary panorama" (L 492).⁴ Stevens has in effect realized that what this French still life shows about the passion for life in a time still riddled by the sense of death could not itself be articulated in a literary version attempting only to picture a still life. That conjunction of being and knowing requires dramatic allegory, and it teaches this poet, himself comfortable in his bourgeois accoutrements, how the tragic can be transfigured into the expressiveness of art.

III

So much for this poem as a particular aesthetic object. We now have to ask why Stevens might think it could provide a satisfying conclusion to *The Auroras of Autumn*? The answer has to reside in the way the poem handles the relation between the process of realization and the acknowledgment of the tragic as the affective awareness necessary for full appreciation of that process. To flesh out a concrete version of this answer, we have to go back to "Esthétique du Mal," a profoundly unsatisfying but also profoundly generative poem where Stevens clearly stretched himself beyond his lyrical comfort zone. This poem stands at the opposite pole from "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," which concludes the volume *Transport to Summer* with triumphant but familiar figures of heroic fluency. "Esthétique du Mal" is far more troubling in its uneasy engagement with the difficulty within modernity of telling one's desire from despair. For a typical critical response to the poem, I cite Vendler: "Esthétique du Mal" lapses from the general topic into "a more lyric examination of the evil most tempting for Stevens—the evil of nostalgia and self-pity, the appetite for sleek ensolacings—or worse, a 'scholarly' interest in his own pain" (207). But rather than add my own voice to the critical chorus, I suggest that we imagine Stevens himself worrying that the poem settles far too easily for lyrical resolutions to the tragic conditions it projects as necessary responses to a world at war.⁵

My evidence is the way the opening poems of the next volume, *The Auroras of Autumn*, return to the motifs of evil and of tragedy, but this time without quite relying on the lyrical effusions Stevens called upon toward the conclusion of the earlier poem. He seems to have felt that he had to engage these motifs yet once more in a way that evaded any temptation

to reduce those phenomena to any thematic resolution proposed by the imagination. What might suffice had to be located more intimately within the very processes of how the imagination takes its stances toward the world.

"*Esthétique du Mal*" tried a fundamentally psychological approach to the poet's sense of the pressure of evil on any imaginative effort to establish fictions that might suffice for a satisfying life. The beginning shows the poet trying to create a protective shell that might insulate him from the pain elicited by observing historical events. But then how can one adequately engage that pain or speak for those who are unwilling or unable to protect themselves from it? More concretely, how prevent the poem from becoming an instance of the very problem of distance that brings it into being?

Stevens resolves "*Esthétique du Mal*" with a gorgeous hymn to the physical world, in the hope that this vehicle will provide a means of addressing "all the ill" (287) oppressing his society. But the problem of evil ultimately extends beyond that physical world to the human one—to the historical world and to the ways humans frame or fail to provide frames for the elements of that world. Stevens has to return to the issue of evil in "*The Auroras of Autumn*," but with a substantial difference. Now he is not content to provide an image of an observer. Rather he analyzes the terms of the observing as the speaker grapples directly with what seem the inherently figurative aspects of that physical world. The poet finds himself torn between the acts of looking at the auroras of autumn and reading the auroras for the analogies that they might suggest for the extraordinary violence of the War years. The poet does not want to turn the auroras into romantic symbols. But he wants in some way to recuperate the meditative space symbols provide by indulging in the temptation to draw affective analogues from what he sees.

The difference from "*Esthétique du Mal*" will be clear if we attend to how "*The Auroras of Autumn*" calls attention to its own efforts to create a bridge from seeing to interpreting. For the evil resides there, not in what the poem discovers so much as in what it suffers in securing any interpretation at all. At first the poem tries to be content with sheer seeing, or accepting a roughly empiricist attitude toward the scene. Five of the eight stanzas in the first canto of "*The Auroras of Autumn*" begin with "This," the favorite empiricist expression because it promises the sufficiency of what can be observed in detail, with no irritable reaching after meaning or edification. But this feeling of distance, of constraining affective connection, also invites the very symbolic echoes that it seeks to repudiate. These are the last stanzas of the first section, where the figure of the serpent returns:

This is his poison: that we should disbelieve
Even that. His meditations in the ferns,
When he moved so slightly to make sure of sun,

Made us no less as sure. We saw in his head,
Black beaded on the rock, the flecked animal,
The moving grass, the Indian in his glade. (355)

The serpent is not Satan, but the poet cannot not develop analogies for the fall, even as he tries to maintain the distance enabling sheer fascination with the objects of attention. Once the analogies start, the last stanza turns them into a rush of standard metaphors. One could treat this situation as a process of description flowering into metaphor, as in "Study of Two Pears." But I feel an uneasiness here, a sense that the metaphors are being asked to supplement a dissatisfaction with the effort to stabilize the night scene by selective description. In almost a parody of Hegel, "This" turns out to problematize the very empirical certainty it tries to secure. The mind is left with the distance from its own desires that is also a distance between the facts of observation and any sense that they embody a reality capable of making the observer's stance into a participant's.⁶

I stress the problems here because the next four sections involve elaborate elegies to what were the poet's trusted ideas, and perhaps an elegy to the faith in forming ideas of any kind. These sections can be seen as a farewell also to romantic treatments of landscape because sheer observation simply cannot satisfy the mind's needs as consciousness finds itself projecting into these violent and sublime eruptions in the night sky. After the elegiac spirit forces the poet to a somewhat sentimental fantasy for restoring what imaginative force he can to maternal and paternal roles, cantos five and six turn from the effort at sheer observation to treating the auroras in grand theatrical terms. However, this ironically brings the sublimity of the auroras too close to what in recent historical events has challenged reason all too successfully. The speaking voice turns to a self-abnegating figure for the fear he now feels. It seems as if entering this theatricality risks surrendering all boundaries providing "the frame / Of everything he is" (359). There must be another possible path. Canto VII proposes a shift from unwieldy theatrics to the sleek consolations of the gay ironist. Now the auroras can be given their innocence, their pure naturalness not sullied by the demands of sheer observation. Yet this produces the poem's most disturbing social position because the price of pursuing this innocence is denying the modes of consciousness that distinguish humans from other beings. This claim to innocence cannot but stir memories of what the serpent once did. It destroyed paradise, but it also created the possibility of deep compassion, sponsoring a renewed dedication to labor on what had become an entirely historical stage.

The ninth canto of the poem desires both innocence and the social compassion that in Christian mythology (and Hegelian phenomenology) comes only after the fall. I cite the first and last stanzas of this section to dramatize how Stevens tries to use the sensuality of language as an instrument for producing a belief to which the analytic mind will not yield:

And of each other thought—in the idiom
Of the work, in the idiom of an innocent earth,
Not of the enigma of the guilty dream.

.....

It may come tomorrow in the simplest word,
Almost as part of innocence, almost,
Almost as the tenderest and the truest part. (361–62)

Only when one hears the hesitations informing these lines will one fully appreciate the abrupt yet fairly quiet transition to a much more abstract mode of thinking in the final section:

An unhappy people in a happy world—
Read, rabbi, the phases of this difference.
An unhappy people in an unhappy world— (362)

Here thinking becomes theatrical, literally calling for the rabbi to take the stage and perform something that can compensate for the loss of the Christian mythology in the background of this poem. The result is a striking gulf between the imperative, “Now, solemnize the secretive syllables . . . to contrive a whole” (362–63) and the reality of this particular imagined rabbi’s individual meditation:

In these unhappy he meditates a whole,
The full of fortune and the full of fate,
As if he lived all lives, that he might know,

In hall harridan, not hushful paradise,
To a haggling of wind and weather, by these lights
Like a blaze of summer straw, in winter’s nick. (363)

Stevens wants a stance that can adapt to this late autumn reality without feeling trapped by the demands to rest content with languages of observation. To achieve that, he has to extend the domain of perception so that it has social implications, or, less abstractly, so that it can at least be responsive to this unhappiness within a happy world without replacing hall harridan by a fantasized “hushful paradise.” But to accomplish that here, he has to rely on a quite romantic image, not unlike Eliot’s “Midwinter spring” (200) that opens “Little Gidding.” The scene for meditation tries to make up in intricacy of sound for what it abstracts away from any actual sense of contact with the sources of unhappiness. More important, and more devastating, “know” is hauntingly intransitive and “whole” disturbingly vague. Whatever release here from the serpent’s poison is at best tenuously poised on the cusp of becoming another idea to which one

must say farewell. The rabbi cannot do much for an unhappy people in any kind of world.

This introductory poem imposes several burdens on the volume. We have seen the most important—it manifests a need to read its own range of attitudes so that the poet and the audience can hear their inadequacies and recognize as temptation what had in the past provided lyric satisfaction. Although Stevens breaks from the thematized introspection of “*Esthétique du Mal*,” his effort to deal explicitly with the unhappy world as an objective condition again risks collapsing into lyrical gestures that do not provide significant extension into the actual world. Yet here at least Stevens makes the extraordinary gesture of beginning a volume with a long poem so that he can acknowledge the difficulties of dealing with the topic of evil. It is true that he might have decided to begin this way simply to balance the volume by providing separation from its other long poem, “*An Ordinary Evening in New Haven*.” But I think Stevens also wants the initial shock of refusing any of the satisfactions of the short lyric because he wants a measure of their inadequacy in dealing with the recurrent motif of tragedy and the tragic. Opening with a long poem, especially a poem that also gives the volume its title, helps cast the short lyrics that follow as aspects of continuing meditations rather than isolated gems offered for the reader’s delectation. That decision makes it seem that aesthetic criteria simply will not suffice for these poems: these poems must be difficult, in large part because they can be only “parts” of an endless effort to resist the satisfactions of traditional lyricism. The poems cannot rest in the fiction of a happy world, or in the gestures by which the rabbi manages to find contentment in the unhappy one.

Two of these lyrics in particular sharpen Stevens’ sense of the continuing demands on the imagination to deal with the fact and the ramifications of evil. “*The Novel*” measures the adequacy of prose fiction “in a bad time,” as Stevens titles one of his poems. Here identification with the characters produces only a “knowledge cold within one as one’s own”:

And one trembles to be so understood and, at last,
To understand, as if to know became
The fatality of seeing things too well. (392)

“*The Bouquet*” provides a devastating summary of what still life can become under the new dispensation, where seeing simply cannot overcome the distance that is both source and result of our awareness of a pervasive unhappiness. Just the length of the poem suggests how difficult it is to create the illusion that by poetry one can supplement the eye and bring a sense of the real to what registers on the eye. The poem’s final section attempts to perform literally what Costello claims the previous still lifes have done: bring into poetry a sense that the imagination can inhabit the actual world. But neither still life nor the lyric has the necessary resources:

A car drives up. A soldier, an officer,
Steps out. He rings and knocks. The door is not locked.
He enters the room and calls. No one is there.

He bumps the table. The bouquet falls on its side.
He walks through the house, looks round him and then
leaves.
The bouquet has slopped over the edge and lies on the
floor. (387)

Each short indicative sentence could be what for Eliot becomes "The last twist of the knife" (18), eloquent in its refusal to be absorbed within the lyrical imagination. There is only the serpent's poison of description without analogy.

IV

It is one thing to notice a pervasive uneasiness in the volume, another to explain it. Here I can only propose to account for one feature of that uneasiness. I think Stevens realizes that there is a dangerous conjunction between the distance demanded by the culture's epistemic ideals of description and by the aesthete's ways of composing a present tense isolated from past and future (or from felt history and possibility). He thought he could build the aesthetic order on the possibility of replacing matter by manner and description by imaginative participation in the flux of experience. Although the contrast between description and participation does establish a distinctive value for "the edgings and inchings of final form" (417), that emphasis on epistemological differences cannot account for the painful quality of those processes. To address this pain, Stevens had to examine what might block even the imagination from grasping its own historical situation. He needed to explore in what ways imagination may be complicit in one mode of evil and then to see how he might reconstitute his projections so that he could foster an imagination capable of taking responsibility for this complicity and so working toward a different mode of self-consciousness.

One way to clarify what was at stake is to reflect on one particular generalization that seems to me to summarize how "Esthétique du Mal" haunts the poems that follow it: "The death of Satan was a tragedy / For the imagination" (281). On one level, this statement refers simply to the fact that once Satan dies the imagination is no longer free to attribute evil to the machinations of a metaphysical personage. The imagination must face the possibility that evil is not caused by an outward agency: evil is simply an aspect of the secular world that neither needs nor invites the poet's supplements. But another possible meaning cuts deeper and honors the care with which Stevens uses the term "tragedy." The death of Satan was a tragedy for the imagination because we now know that the imagi-

nation is often culpable in such evil. There is the simple but elemental fact that, as the imagination turns to its home in romance, it theatricalizes evil and ignores the ways that evil is embedded in quotidian practices. Those thinkers and writers who rely on fleshing out imaginative scenarios might in fact miss those locales of evil that the mind and the ordinary human will might have the power to address.

This concern for evil embedded in quotidian practices will obviously not address all evil. But it might help to foster distinctions that enable writers to separate what they can address as sources and effects of evil from what only produces fantastic modes of explanation, each with a story of heroes and victims that is likely to miss what most humans can in fact control. To clarify what I mean, I suggest that we distinguish between three basic kinds of evil. The first two inflict the greatest harm, but that magnitude dwarfs any effort by writers to do anything but register and mourn the sufferings created. First we can isolate gross collective suffering from phenomena, which it is impossible to attribute to particular human agents. Ultimately this class comprises all the factors that we attribute to the sheer facts of mortality and contingency—to what Satan cost in provoking the expulsion from Paradise. The second category consists of evil that is clearly attributable to weaknesses or excesses in specific human agents and associations of agents. This class extends from cases of particular persons who will to wreak havoc to cases where agency is more diffuse but no less active, for example, in places where people persecute others for reasons of race, class, or religion.

Classical writing thrived in such circumstances because it could identify with the suffering and intensify it by emphasizing the social costs for all the participants. But with the shift to romantic values and the centrality of first person stances, it became increasingly difficult to find writerly stances that could engage these modes of suffering: Tolstoy would have to yield to Dostoyevsky. As self-conscious subjectivity is foregrounded, writers become uncomfortable in identifying with victims, however heroic or however pathetic the victimage. For the writer in the writing feels tempted to two unfortunate alternatives—lapsing into self-aggrandizing self-pity or calling upon powers of moral judgment to change conditions even though the writer cannot be sure what authority sustains such moral judgments. In both cases it seems that the writer and the writing stand apart from the evils it represents, and the writer's role becomes an imaginary substitute for impotence. If only one could believe that Satan exists, figuratively if not literally, then the author could postulate agency behind the evil and could stage powerful dramas of freeing itself from complicity—Stanley Fish's version *Surprised by Sin* comes to mind. Once we believe Satan is dead, tragedy seems almost as much a product of the rhetorician's imagination as it is a condition to which the writer is trying to respond.

This is why it is important for writers such as Stevens to postulate a third kind of evil where writers can imagine their presentations making

a difference in how an audience might behave. In these cases, one must begin by admitting that such audiences are for the most part not responsible for the major evils in the world. But they are responsible for how they develop or fail to develop modes of attention and of recognition that affect the quality of social life. They are responsible for how they engage with those who suffer from the more dramatic forms of evil. Here the writers do have significant power to affect how self-consciousness gets deployed. For Stevens at least, the poet could try to model or demonstrate ways of resisting the temptation to treat self-consciousness as a mode of protective distance from both the weaknesses of the agent and the reality of the suffering experienced by others. He could show how debilitating this sense of distance is, in part because it is so intimate and fundamental a structure governing how we process a wide range of experiences.

Stevens' critique of description brings him quite close to Stanley Cavell's magisterial analysis of how skepticism can be located as the deep cause of much of this distance, and especially of modern thought's comfort with this distance. Skepticism cultivates doubt and forces most of its opponents into stark empiricist claims that jettison all trust in psychological labors. There is only the subject apart from the world, a condition that elicits fantasies of revenge on that very world that will not accord with our fantasies. But Stevens gradually saw that skepticism was only part of the problematic heritage for modernist culture. The very aesthetic attitudes that were developed by romanticism to re-enchant the world now had become strangely conjoined with the very forces of disenchantment. For aesthetic attitudes also insisted on a distance from the world, a difference that was necessary for the labors of formal intelligence. He increasingly became insistent on working out how his poems might become parts of the world, parts of the very flux from which the speaker of "Esthétique du Mal" seeks his distance.

In other words, Stevens increasingly felt that he had not only to resist romanticism but to resist the temptation to treat all values on a romantic model. Therefore, he could not share a Cavellian missionary enthusiasm preaching a change in belief: therapeutic ambitions on that level only reinforced the fiction that values were set by beliefs rather than by the dispositional qualities affecting how we attend to what the world might present at any given moment. The sense of distance he worries about is rarely a matter of will and even more rarely is responsive to any kind of talking cure. That indeed is why poetry might actually make a difference, or at least why Stevens' poetry might make a difference by converting substance into subtlety. For this poetry does not seek the kind of understanding that might shape our principles. Rather it tries to engage dispositions by modeling how thinking moves and how thinking might have internal modifications that give different kinds of affects a presence they might not otherwise have. Poetry can keep open the rift between fact and reality, and it can explore the feelings and filiations possible when analogy works to

fuse the metaphysical to the physical. As Stevens put it in discussing the angel of reality, "reality and contact with it are the great blessings."

V

Stevens' fullest response to the crisis of distance occurs in many of the poems in *The Rock*. Consider an especially acute and concise overcoming of distance in "An Old Man Asleep," the poem that introduces the volume. The poem opens with a scene of dumb sense where "The two worlds are asleep, are sleeping, now" in "a kind of solemnity" (427). Then it focuses on the sleeper, offering a simple poem of reconciliation to old age:

The self and the earth—your thoughts, your feelings,
Your beliefs and disbeliefs, your whole peculiar plot;

The redness of your reddish chestnut trees,
The river motion, the drowsy motion of the river R. (427)

In order to appreciate the full resonance of that simplicity, we have to see how the poem comes very close to representing the man as one of "The Things of August." Yet the poet manages to give the sleeping person a psychology that on the most elemental level fully transforms fact into "reality." That is why the poem moves from "asleep" to "are sleeping," why the sleeping is attributed to an elemental relation between self and earth, and why there is such smooth transition between that general condition and the terms of direct address: "your thoughts, your feelings. . . ." It is as if the poem found a level of being where the condition of address and the condition of description were almost identical. Although those conditions are fundamentally related, they are diametrically opposed. Description here provides the fact of the matter. Something else, something carried in the play on sounds and play of perspective, provides access to the reality of the scene, to its being irreducibly inhabited by a particular person's "peculiar plot." Seen descriptively, this plot consists largely of simply sleeping. But considered in terms of how the situation is represented, the scene pulses with the investments the sleeper still makes in his world.

How otherwise can we explain the resonance of "drowsy" in this poem? The addition of "drowsy" to the repetition of "river motion" provides a little climax in relation to the poem's use of address, because even when the self is reduced almost to the object, it can elicit something excessive and at least somewhat distinctive. Here I have to admit that the distinction is mostly on the level of sound, since the *ow* sound in "drowsy" so picks up and extends the *o*'s in the line that it takes the line itself beyond description to an affirmation of peculiar presence. But once we see how "drowsy" operates, all of the markers of possession become resonant reminders of the difference between a simple body asleep and a subject sleeping as one of the possible actions still left that it can possess. Agency itself seems

something that we can recognize and honor simply by accepting the minimal yet completely expansive shift that occurs when something compels us to move from description to address.

The Stevens of *The Auroras of Autumn* was not quite ready or willing to project this calm winning of elemental dignity from an awareness of the pressures of mortality. This Stevens was still caught in an uneasy struggle to tease out a more general and reflective stance toward tragic necessity. Looking backward from *The Rock* may be the best way to appreciate the enormous pressure the motif of distance creates for "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," the poem most fully summarizing how Stevens has been able to go beyond the contradictory movements of "Esthétique du Mal." Vendler makes my job considerably easier because she offers extended (and superb) commentary on how the poem works variations on its first line: "The eye's plain version is a thing apart" (279–88). All I need to point out is how part of that meditation involves Stevens' finally resolving a basic tension in his other long poems written in the 1940s. There he seems torn between still imagining an argumentative sequence where the poem arrives at some discovery, stated imagistically, and developing a mode where the resolution consists simply in coming to accept the poem's ways of circulating. "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" goes a long way toward resting within the processes of constant transformation as the mind attunes itself to the constant possibilities of what is seen. For the mind there simply is never "The eye's plain version": "The eye does not beget in resemblance. It sees. But the mind begets in resemblance as the painter begets in representation; that is to say, as the painter makes his world within a world" (689). Where there is a mind working, there is an "as," more or less suppressed. Even plainness is not a condition of the object but primarily an attribute of the seeing. Objects are always more or less plain, so they are necessarily related to needs or desires that contextualize the seeing as well as afford various possibilities of further realization.⁷

Stevens' first essay in "Three Academic Pieces" emphasizes how poetry's work with resemblance "enhances the sense of reality, heightens it, intensifies it" (690). He is not explicit about how that intensified sense of reality might be inseparable from a tragic awareness of the instability of such satisfactions. But I think the connection is not difficult to make. Where there is constant resemblance, and so constant transformation, there is also always playing out the drama of mortality. If it is the case that there is "not grim / Reality but reality grimly seen" (405), then "tragedy" (408) becomes *tragically*. The adverb is in constant interplay with other attitudinal modifiers. A lesser thinker than Stevens might conclude that therefore modern thinking has reduced tragedy to one of many dispositions. But the shift to seeing things "grimly" does not at all banish thinking shaped by considerations of tragedy. It only entails seeing tragedy as also fundamentally a part of the world, always potentially fused with other frameworks, just as resemblance is always a mix between deconstruction

and construction. Reality as a force becomes inseparable from the shade it traverses:

And something of death's poverty is heard.
This should be tragedy's most moving face.

It is a bough in the electric light
And exhalations in the eaves, so little
To indicate the total leaflessness. (407)

Even this total leaflessness frames the light and a sense of the exhalation it gives. The reminder of mortality is also a coming to terms with it by using the reminder as a metaphysical light allowing the qualities of the physical world to manifest themselves in their particularity.

In theory there remains only the need to let the metaphysical exhale in the background, leaving the foreground to the figures of dwelling in the great last poems. But this solution is not yet quite available for *The Auroras of Autumn*. Therefore Stevens follows "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" by two concluding poems. The first, "Things of August," is a poem of lament rather than of celebration. Here when things lose their metaphysical aura, as things have a tendency to do in August, even transformation becomes "exhausted and a little old" (422). But this exhaustion brings substantial vitality to two qualities emphasized by giving the final place in the volume to "Angel Surrounded by Paysans." The first is the poem's playfulness, its capacity to insist on a metaphysical dimension to the earth's becoming, while, as poetry, it naturalizes the metaphysical by making it an extension of the imagination's irreducible capacity to escape the lugubrious and the pious. The second is its remarkable ability to insist on a series of transformations that dramatize that very power to resist exhaustion. The painting transforms a still life into poetry, and the poetry manages to make the vitality Stevens celebrates in Tal-Coat's painting intensely visible by a second transformation into a dramatic scene presenting a brief and enigmatic narrative. Perhaps so reducing the narrative allows Stevens a new blend of concreteness and abstraction where he does not have to represent these concrete transformations but can concentrate on composing a figure for the vitality of constant transformation. Perhaps "Angel Surrounded by Paysans" takes pride of place in its volume because that concreteness there is most intimately rendered as aspects of processes that have little to do with the shaping of arguments and the forging of beliefs. Pride of place here is given to the poem that most fully blends the appreciation of realization with a sense of inevitable suffering that is belied by any abstract formulation.

Finally, I suspect that this poem for Stevens works another transformation of distance, this time on a much larger cultural scale. In 1945 Stevens wrote sympathetically to Paule Vidal, "At the moment, France is some-

thing much more tragic than a literary panorama" (L 492). Stevens might have seen Tal-Coat's "display of imaginative force" attempting "to attain a certain reality purely by way of the artist's own vitality" as illustrating a will to significance born in this sense of tragic exhaustion and capable of incorporating it within a more capacious sense of life. This still life comes to exemplify, in the poem's address to the "paysans," the one explicit French touch in the poem, how the serpent and the angel might be one. In that process, the poem made of that still life can testify to an intricate and delicate wit in the face of suffering that the poet had always attributed to the France that commanded his fascination. Or, as Stevens expresses it a few years later in "Imago," a poem about all of post-war Europe,

*Lightly and lightly, O my land,
Move lightly through the air again. (377)*

Even though this poem refers to England and Germany as well as France, it is not difficult to think that France is what most elicits this ending.

University of California, Berkeley

Notes

¹I want also to call attention to a letter in which Stevens says to Paule Vidal, "It is obvious that this picture is the contrary of everything that one would expect in a still life" (L 655). How could Stevens not then try out a different genre in his attempt to meditate on what the foregrounded "vigor of the artist" (L 655) might imply about how art can engage a distinctively modern reality?

²Wallace Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 423. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with page number only in parentheses.

³Costello defines "megalography" as presentation on a grand scale, and "rhogography" as "mediation on small scale decorative and domestic objects" or "low plane reality" (477).

⁴The rarely noticed poem "Imago" is more elaborate on this point and so close in spirit to "Angel Surrounded by Paysans" that it supports my desire to see them both as dealing fundamentally with how poetry can deal with the tragic. "Imago" is even explicit on the role of the lightness that I think is the central feature of "Angel Surrounded by Paysans." But the latter poem makes lightness a property of the action rather than a lyrical motif.

⁵For evidence of Stevens' own dissatisfaction, see L 472.

⁶No wonder the next stanzas enact an ascetic turn from three basic ideas of how the observer might be participant—from the Cézannian sense that there can be a visibility of the visible satisfying to the imagination; from fantasies of union with the mother; and even from the illusion of patriarchal mastery forced to accommodate the world of observation by saying "yes / To no" (357), and so saying farewell to any satisfaction even in the acts of observation.

⁷Notice how canto IX in particular resolves the tension between particularity and generality in "The Auroras of Autumn" by insisting, "We seek / Nothing beyond reality. Within it, / Everything, the spirit's alchemicana / Included" (402); see also the end

of canto XXVII. I have written on how "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" enacts what it asserts in *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry*, 343–47.

Works Cited

- Altieri, Charles. *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1989.
- Cavell, Stanley. *The Cavell Reader*. Ed. Stephen Mulhall. Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996.
- Costello, Bonnie. "Planets on Tables: Still Life and War in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens." *Modernism/Modernity* 12 (2005): 443–58.
- Eliot, T. S. *Collected Poems 1909–1962*. 1963. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1970.
- Filreis, Alan. "Still Life without Substance: Wallace Stevens and the Language of Agency." *Poetics Today* 10.2 (1989): 345–72.
- Fish, Stanley. *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*. New York: St. Martin's P, 1967.
- Lawder, Bruce. "Poetry and Painting: Wallace Stevens and Pierre Tal-Coat." *Word and Image* 18.4 (2002): 348–56.
- Longenbach, James. *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things*. New York: Oxford UP, 1991.
- Maeder, Beverly. *Wallace Stevens' Experimental Language: The Lion in the Lute*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.
- Stevens, Wallace. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*. Ed. Holly Stevens. New York: Knopf, 1966.
- . *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson. New York: Library of America, 1997.
- Vendler, Helen. *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1969.
- Yeats, William Butler. *The Poems of W. B. Yeats*. Ed. Richard Finneran. New York: Macmillan, 1983.

The Moment of a Bird's Cry: A Note on Wallace Stevens and Simone Weil

JACEK GUTOROW

THE FRENCH PHILOSOPHER and political activist Simone Weil was hardly known when she died in 1943 at the age of 34. In 1947, Gustave Thibon collected some of her notes and published them as *La Pesanteur et la grâce*, adding his helpful commentary. In the subsequent years Weil's writings were edited and published by Albert Camus in his *Espoir* series. However, it was Thibon's book that attracted the readers' attention to an obscure, bespectacled thinker and her radical and non-conformist views on religion and society that went hand in glove with the post-War sense of the collapse of civilization. His careful selection, topical and not chronological, rightly stressed existential moments of Weil's religious thought and showed its dynamic character: the notes constitute a resplendent order of loose fragments that gravitate toward one another but evade making up a logical and coherent whole.

Weil's religious existentialism was credible and persuasive to many European thinkers who tried to come to terms with the Second World War disaster—first in France (Camus), then in other countries of the divided Europe. The Polish reception of Weil's work is a good example. Completely unknown before the war, Weil became one of the dominating influences on the Polish Catholic (but also non-Catholic) intelligentsia in the 1950s. In 1958, Czesław Miłosz published his translations of Weil in the Paris-based magazine *Kultura*, founded by an informal group of Polish intellectuals who decided to remain in the West. Weil proved a lasting fascination: many Polish writers still fall under her spell, and her books continue to be published and read in Poland.

The English translation, done by Arthur Wills and published in 1952 as *Gravity and Grace*, remains the most probable choice for the English reader who wants to make his or her first acquaintance with Weil. Weil remains a somewhat vague figure both in the U.S. and in England. Her presence might have been strongly felt in the postwar years (Susan Sontag's celebrated review published in 1963 in *The New York Review of Books* is an example), and once in a while one can come across an interesting review or essay devoted to her work or, more often, her life. There are few biographies and critical monographs. But it would be difficult to find any cru-

cial intellectual or artistic movements (comparable to those in France or Poland) inspired by Weil's writings. The reception of her works in the U.S. and England has been limited to academic publications and philosophical/literary magazines.

The name may sound familiar to the attentive readers of contemporary American poetry. Jorie Graham's 2005 volume *Overlord* contains quotes from and allusions to Weil's *Waiting for God*, an important collection brought out in 1951 and preceded by Leslie A. Fiedler's incisive preface, and Ann Carson's collection of critical essays published in 2004 includes insights drawn directly from the French mystic. It is interesting to note that both Graham and Carson are also indebted to Stevens and that Weil's and Stevens' examples seem to interact. In Graham's poems, fascination with the later poetry of Stevens parallels a strong interest in Pascal and Weil. Such a constellation of names may prove disconcerting to some readers, but hopefully not to the readers of Stevens. After all, the poet mentioned Pascal in his essays and became interested in Thibon's pioneering edition of Weil's notebook entries. It is true that Stevens was hostile to any attempts at illuminating poetry with religious truths and orthodox dogmas—note his ambivalent "Homage to T. S. Eliot" in which Stevens suggested "Reading Eliot out of the pew."¹ But it is also true that, as Adelaide Morris writes, Stevens' "search for a substitute for religion occupied his poetic energy from the early poetry to the late" (9). It is not at all surprising that, similarly to Camus and Miłosz, whose critical views of the Catholic Church were well known, Stevens turned to those thinkers who offered religious truths but at the same time remained on the verges of the orthodox church. Two particular instances—those of Pascal and Weil—are almost obvious here: these were writers who spoke about religion but from the perspective of the outsider.

One thing to remark is that Stevens' preoccupation with Pascal and Weil was far from mere affirmation of their views. On the contrary, Stevens seems to have been persuaded by what might be called "uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts" inherent in their texts. I refer, of course, to Keats's notion of "Negative Capability" because it seems to be a fine rendering of the primary impulse that attracted Stevens. What he looked for was not a set of propositions, but rather a kind of sensibility that admitted of negation and contradiction as two primary steps in approaching religious truths.

What might have attracted the poet's attention were the sections of *La Pesanteur et la grâce* entitled "Contradiction" and "Atheism." It should be noted that some of Weil's notes are genuinely disturbing, such as the one saying, "he who denies [God] is perhaps nearer to him than the other" (167), or the one proclaiming atheism to be a means of purification (168). But perhaps only such aphorisms might be accepted by the poet who had bid farewell to all metaphysical ideas. As many critics have shown, Stevens' favorite poetic strategy was that of making his poems ambiguous

and self-contradictory to such a degree that the poetry became a record of its own impossibility. Such an approach made it impossible to arrive at any fixed statements. However, it left much room for saying things by contradicting and un-naming them. What Stevens found in Weil was an odd combination of the negative method and a strong religious sensitivity based on evasion and avoidance. Even the word "religion" was negated, but it was there, and in such a way that the poet did not have to resort to it, but rather to experience its condition.

Stevens mentions Weil but once, at the end of his 1951 essay on the relations between poetry and painting. We cannot find anything about his interest in Weil in his letters (other French writers, such as Paul Valéry or Stéphane Mallarmé, are often evoked and discussed), but one can easily guess that Stevens must have read the original as the English translation was published after he had written his essay. The Weil fragment is noteworthy as it is strategically placed at the end of the text, becoming a sort of culmination of Stevens' meditation on the "sister arts." When the poet's collection of essays, *The Necessary Angel*, was published in 1954, the Weil reference became the conclusion of the whole book:

Simone Weil in *La Pesanteur et La Grâce* has a chapter on what she calls decreation. She says that decreation is making pass from the created to the uncreated, but that destruction is making pass from the created to nothingness. Modern reality is a reality of decreation, in which our revelations are not the revelations of belief, but the precious portents of our own powers. (750)

The first sentence is almost a literal translation of Weil's words.² The second one is evidently a kind of commentary added by Stevens for the sake of his discussion on contemporary painting and poetry. It is doubtful whether Weil would have been willing to describe modern reality as a reality of decreation. After all, she saw decreation as a unique mystical experience of abandoning, emptying, and uprooting oneself. However, the logic of the fragment makes perfect sense in light of Stevens' discussion on modern art (his own poetry included) as an art that is abstract and non-figurative, bent on deconstructing rather than representing reality.

Although "decreation" is the key concept in Weil, Stevens also might have been attracted by the formal qualities of her writings. It is worth noting that at least since the 1930s Stevens was more and more fascinated by the aphoristic mode, a possible alternative to his long poems, which gravitated toward, what he called in canto XXVIII of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," the "endlessly elaborating poem" (415). Hence his own collections of entries, notes, and quotations contained within his various notebooks: "Schemata," *Sur Plusieurs Beaux Sujets*, "Adagia," "Materia Poetica." It seems that Stevens might have echoed Friedrich Nietzsche,

whom he started reading in the first half of the 1940s, who perceived aphorism as a coded message to be “‘deciphered,’ ” and not just a sentence that could have “simply been read” (23). Also, the aphoristic mode made it possible to juxtapose contradictory fragments and do so more radically than by proposing a self-contradictory logic within a poem. Speaking by means of aphorisms has the advantage of being ambiguous, because nothing tells us to combine and associate separate units. Potential conclusions drawn from a series of aphorisms are the results of the readers’ activity, and the author does not intervene into how we associate particular fragments and what we read into them.

Stevens’ growing interest in Nietzsche, Pascal, and Weil is understandable not only in the context of the poet’s search for substitutes of the lost faith, but also in the context of his preoccupation with changes of means of artistic expression. This can be seen in his analyses of the words and works of contemporary painters. For example, just before quoting Weil, Stevens provides two quotes from Cézanne: “ ‘I see planes bestriding each other and sometimes straight lines seem to me to fall,’ ” and “ ‘Planes in color. . . . The colored area where shimmer the souls of the planes, in the blaze of the kindled prism, the meeting of planes in the sunlight’ ” (750). One can see that Stevens sees in modern painting an aphoristic sensibility informed by collisions and constellations of planes and viewpoints that do not fit in to create a whole but open a heterogeneous space of various perspectives. The use of aphorisms amounts to the same effect—no overall vision of reality but rather different approaches to it.

In this sense the aphoristic mode unsettles our customary approaches to language and reality and helps refresh, or even reconstruct, our attitude toward them. What Stevens found in the writings of the three masters of the genre was the power and the momentum of the dialogic imagination (Bakhtin’s distinctions seem particularly relevant here), the one that proceeds by questioning its own legitimacy and then revealing a need to re-imagine oneself and things. Stevens had already provoked such a train of thought in his early volumes and developed the self-contradictory idiom in his magnificent long poems. In a way, Stevens’ interest in aphorism marked a transition to his last poems, whose greatness lies in a kind of negative capability to reduce language to its basic forms and whose power is due to their terseness. Simone Weil’s texts, intentionally stripped of all ornamentation and rhetoric, might have been helpful here.

Stevens’ reference to Weil’s notion of decreation has been commented on in many ways. It is important to note that Stevens placed the quotation in the essay devoted to the relations between poetry and painting, constituting a significant context in which decreation is associated with the issue of representation and reconstruction of reality. In a sense, he reproduces in his text an anti-mimetic argument, claiming that the power of contemporary poetry and painting lies in its ability to demonstrate the insufficiency, indeed impossibility, of realistic presentation, and to show

how the sensibility that abstracts from reality can reconstruct it and attain the stage of artistic mastery. It is all a matter, Stevens argues, of going back to first impulses, which precede a poetic (and painterly) act and of undoing the rhetoricity hidden in language and literature. No wonder the poet seems fond of quoting the artists who stress the need to go beyond a mere act of creation and toward its silent source. Here is, for instance, a quotation from Paul Klee that Stevens places at the end of his essay: " 'But he is one chosen that today comes near to the secret places where original law fosters all evolution. And what artist would not establish himself there where the organic center of all movement in time and space—which he calls the mind or heart of creation—determines every function' " (750).

Decreation is the like movement toward undoing all artistry and rhetoricity easily associated with poetry and painting. As Rob Wilson observes, it is a mode that might help the poet achieve a higher, or rather fundamental, level of sensibility, one appearing at a threshold and thus resulting from the operations of the mind in its sublime mode. Wilson points to the notion of decreation in his analysis of Stevens' "The American Sublime": "Stevens will not settle for a simple equation of the natural sublime ('space') with the sublime of consciousness ('spirit'). The American Sublime must also come down, via decreation, to a zero degree of rhetorical emptiness" (176).

Decreation is thus a limit, a moment of purification and forgetfulness, when language is abandoned and what is left is pure sensibility, the eye's plain version, which cannot be articulated. The notion is included in a discussion on the "modernist terrors of nothingness, emptiness, deprivation, and disaster" (Wilson 195), and it articulates sentiments present in the poems of T. S. Eliot (the "zero summer" of *The Four Quartets*) and Ezra Pound (references in *The Cantos* to the scholastic reduction of reality to pure light). Also, it becomes a secular substitute for the mystical experiences discussed by Weil. Although Weil acknowledges atheism as a stage of purification, she finalizes her study by resorting to religion: "They need that their life should be a poem. They need some light from eternity. Religion alone can be the source of such poetry" (*Gravity and Grace* 235). But Stevens avoids the word "religion" and uses other terms instead, sometimes "reality," and sometimes the "imagination."

Stevens' interest in Pascal and Weil was connected with his more and more critical attitude toward the place and status of the imagination. Even his essay on "Imagination as Value" (written in 1948), an apparent eulogy on the power of the imaginative faculty, starts with Pascal's objections, which resound through the whole text: "[Pascal] called [the imagination] the deceptive element in man, the mistress of error and duplicity" (724). We know that such doubts permeate Stevens' late poems, which show the imagination as the most powerful faculty in humans, while at the same time questioning its very foundation to demonstrate the process of linguistic inflation and exhaustion. Admiration and suspicion: the two senti-

ments run through Stevens' late poetry and leave the impression of the poet trying to do away with his nostalgic bouts, but unable to do so.

Similar is Weil's attitude toward artistic imagination, as expressed fully in the fourth section of *La Pesanteur et la grâce* (entitled "Imagination Which Fills the Void"). Stevens, who had followed Coleridge in claiming the imagination to be the primary agent of the human mind, must have been puzzled to discover a philosophy criticizing and rejecting it in such words:

The imagination, filler of the void, is essentially a liar. It does away with the third dimension, for only real objects have three dimensions. It does away with multiple relationships. . . . We must continually suspend the work of the imagination in filling the void within ourselves. (*Gravity and Grace* 62, 64)

It seems that in his poems and essays written after 1940, Stevens does not reject the imagination but redefines it in a way that is closer to Pascal and Weil than to Blake, Coleridge, or Shelley. In "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," it is an uneasy interdependence of the imagination and reality that is the main subject. The poet's point of departure is a rejection of Platonism and its separation of reality and the domain of (unreal) ideas. Contrary to this, Stevens claims, "The imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real. When it adheres to the unreal and intensifies what is unreal, while its first effect may be extraordinary, that effect is the maximum effect that it will ever have" (645). This may be compared to some memorable lines in the poems that mark a departure from the earlier poetic idiom (e.g., the nightingale torturing the ear and the crude "The the" [186] tautology in "The Man on the Dump"; the man destroying "romantic tenements" [218] in "Man and Bottle"; or the three farewells to an idea in "The Auroras of Autumn"). At its most extreme, this is indeed the "poetry of palinode or retraction . . . a reexamination of and a commentary on the prescriptive imagination," developed by the poet in the 1940s (Jenkins 8). It is therefore somewhat surprising that Stevens' movement toward a radical reformulation of his poetic language coincided with his following Weil's dramatic appeals. Who would believe that a poet with a taste for colorful postcards and stylized book-bindings would share the philosophy of renunciation and detachment?

Weil's idea of decreation is close to what Stevens perceived as the need to abandon the imagination and to see things in their poverty—in one of his most stupendous poems he would call it "The Plain Sense of Things." Thus, his reference to Weil can be put in a broader context of Stevens' poetry and its development. The moment of decreation seems to be a *non plus* ultra of his art, a limit put to the play of the imagination in the poet's mind, and this in order to conform to the "pressure of reality," the latter

being a new key word in Stevens' poetic vocabulary. Helen Regueiro articulated this notion:

Poetry has ceased being an instrument of domination to become a vehicle toward the experience of being. In limiting and undermining itself the poetic imagination has touched briefly the unimagined reality. It has brought us to the threshold of the "simple space" and silenced itself before it could fragment and reconstruct it. And in deliberately creating a void at the center of the poetic structure, the "absence for the poem" has finally turned, "at the end of the mind," into the presence of reality. (218)

Similarly, and more to the point, Roy Harvey Pearce, in his seminal essay, "Toward Decreation: Stevens and the 'Theory of Poetry,'" observes:

One way of looking at the development of Stevens' poetry, then, would be to trace the development of hypothesis into thesis. And here decreation—first as a condition of the working of the imagination, then as a process, and finally as an integral component of poetic realization—is primary in Stevens' theory of poetry and in the working of the poems themselves. (287)

One objection to Pearce's statements might be that decreation cannot be viewed as a "condition of the working of the imagination." As is clear from Weil's arguments, and I think Stevens shared them, decreation is not just another artistic strategy. On the contrary, it tries to question and undo the very idea of a strategy, leaving no room for sidetracking and conditioning the thesis, be it the poem (Stevens) or religious/philosophical dogma (Weil). Obviously, such a critical approach is quite demanding. As Stevens admits in "The Plain Sense of Things," the imagination seems to survive and even re-live its own end: "the absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined" (428). Still, changing one's focus of attention from the imagination to its absence is in itself momentous and marks a decisive turn in Stevens' poetic development.

In "Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself," one of Stevens' last poems, the poet hears, or imagines that he hears, a bird singing outside his window, "far away." He concludes: "It was like / A new knowledge of reality" (452). In other poems written at the time, the poet gave up any pretense to be a seer imagining things, stripping himself of all fictions, which had helped him cope with his own life. A new knowledge of reality was the knowledge reduced to nothingness, to "mere being" (476). How close these are to Weil's dramatic postulates: "To empty ourselves of the world. . . . To reduce ourselves to the point we occupy in space and time. To nothing" (*Gravity and Grace* 57).

However—and this is the point I would like to stress—neither Weil nor Stevens was a nihilist. This is evident in Weil, whose intellectual and spiritual development, in spite of her statements on the importance of atheism, proceeded, as she herself wrote, “on the threshold of the [Roman Catholic] Church” (*Waiting for God* 11). Although she did not choose to be baptized (her reservations are beautifully expounded in her “Hesitations Concerning Baptism,” one of the letters sent to Father Perrin, and the text that opens the *Waiting for God* collection), she still tended toward the kind of devoutness associated with such Christian mystics as Meister Eckhart or St. John of the Cross. What is perhaps most significant, she differentiated between destruction and decreation, the former marking the pass to nothingness (thus nihilism), the latter revealing a void of possibilities. Decreation is definitely a challenge and not a scene of destruction.

Stevens’ intellectual and spiritual trajectory was similar. His stressing moments of indeterminacy and ambiguity might be accounted for as a strategy aimed at provoking some radical existential states and responses. Apparently, Stevens did not believe in the possibility of his spiritual conversion and he did not take it into account. However, he had always articulated a want for radical changes and searched for those intellectual propositions that were informed by the conviction that man has to surpass himself and attain what Wordsworth called (in the first book of *The Prelude*) “unknown modes of being” (57). Hence, the significance of various borders, edges, and thresholds in Stevens’ poetry. Nihilistic states that Stevens sometimes seems to describe are just stages of existential development, and they should be viewed in the context of what Stevens believed to be the growth of the poet’s mind.

At the same time, however, he was not a poet of simple affirmations. On the contrary, he liked to see himself as someone remaining on the threshold of possibilities rather than the level of actual decisions and solutions. This is expressed in “To an Old Philosopher in Rome,” his poem dedicated to the dying George Santayana, who is described as stopping on the threshold of reality and heaven. But such a liminal position is also the position of opening up, and I think it was in Weil that Stevens found a kind of rationale for his assumptions, all the more because Weil herself spoke from the position of an outsider. Weil was capable of eliciting from her hesitations and negations a project for her life, and, as readers of Stevens know only too well, the poet’s drama was just about this. It is not unusual to discover in Weil thoughts and ideas that strongly inform our understanding of what Stevens was after in the last years of his life. These are most often connected with revealing an existential and metaphysical appeal in the midst of apparently hopeless propositions, such as this aphorism of Weil’s, which nicely summarizes her thinking: “Impossibility is the door of the supernatural. We can but knock at it. It is someone else who opens” (*Gravity and Grace* 148).

As far as I know, no critic has attempted to analyze Stevens' poetry in the light of the idea of hospitality. It might be interesting to see the poet trying to define himself by referring to others. A well known illustration of this would be Stevens' friendship with Henry Church. But it would also hold true in reference to those he did not meet personally. As I have just tried to suggest, the encounter with the thought of Simone Weil seems to me one of those decisive moments that helped Stevens find a catalyst for his own reflections. It might have been a momentary and somewhat casual interest at the beginning, a typically Stevensian blast of interest with something or someone unfamiliar. But then we know from Stevens' letters that such encounters, however accidental, moved the poet to rare confessions and insights. This is the case of his meeting Weil—unintentional, indeed, but also fruitful and resulting in a new knowledge of reality.

Weil's presence in Stevens is as elusive as that of a bird's cry in "Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself": not fully confirmed and tangible (the cry "Seemed like a sound in his mind" [451]), yet stirring in the poet's consciousness and consequently making him long for something "Still far away" (452). I think Weil would have loved the image of the bird outside the poet's window. And I am sure her aphorisms made their way to Stevens' late poetry, if not in the form of direct influence, then by way of echoes and sudden crystallizations. We must not ignore this rendezvous of two minds that desperately searched for the bedrock of existence, which was otherwise impalpable and fictional to them.

University of Opole
Poland

Notes

¹Wallace Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 801. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with page number only in parentheses.

²Arthur Wills's translation reads: "Decreation: to make something created pass into the uncreated. Destruction: To make something created pass into nothingness" (78). The two sentences constitute two separate paragraphs.

Works Cited

- Carson, Anne. *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera*. London: Vintage, 2006.
- Graham, Jorie. *Overlord: Poems*. New York: Ecco P, 2005.
- Jenkins, Lee Margaret. *Wallace Stevens: Rage for Order*. Brighton and Portland: Sussex Academic P, 2000.
- Morris, Adalaide Kirby. *Wallace Stevens: Imagination and Faith*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1974.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morals. Ecce Homo*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale. Ed. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1969.
- Pearce, Roy Harvey. "Toward Decreation: Stevens and the 'Theory of Poetry.'" *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*. Ed. Robert Buttel and Frank A. Doggett. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980.

- Regueiro, Helen. *The Limits of Imagination: Wordsworth, Yeats, and Stevens*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1976.
- Sontag, Susan. "Simone Weil." *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. New York: Dell, 1966. 49–51.
- Stevens, Wallace. *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson. New York: Library of America, 1997.
- Weil, Simone. *Gravity and Grace*. Trans. Arthur Wills. Intro. Gustave Thibon. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1997.
- . *Waiting for God*. Trans. Emma Craufurd. Intro. Leslie A. Fiedler. New York: Perennial Classics, 2001.
- Wilson, Rob. *American Sublime: The Genealogy of a Poetic Genre*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1991.
- Wordsworth, William. *The Prelude: A Parallel Text*. Ed. J. C. Maxwell. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971.

Pure Poetry, Ideas of Order, and the Problem of Poetic Solitude

BENJAMIN JOHNSON

IN 1936, WALLACE STEVENS tried his hand at one of the more difficult feats in American letters: he attempted to analyze a book of poetry by Wallace Stevens. In the dust-jacket blurb to the second edition of his 1935 book, *Ideas of Order*, he concludes:

The book is essentially a book of pure poetry. I believe that, in any society, the poet should be the exponent of the imagination of that society. *Ideas of Order* attempts to illustrate the role of the imagination in life, and particularly in life at present. The more realistic life may be, the more it needs the stimulus of the imagination.¹

This dust jacket is, with the exception of a few brief reviews, the first prose statement on poetics Stevens had published in a career that was already two decades old. The passage is not particularly remarkable as a piece of literary criticism, but it is representative of the shifts that were taking place in Stevens' poetic terminology. For instance, when Stevens describes the "realistic" character of "life at present," he signals a newfound desire to write about social and political issues, even as he also implicitly responds to claims made by Stanley Burnshaw and other leftist literary critics that his poetry is overly sensuous and escapist. At the same time, his argument that poetry should mediate between reality and the imagination anticipates his far more famous essays of the 1940s, which argue that the poet can and should create a sense of order in a disenchanted world.

However, for all the passage suggests about Stevens' present and future, a perceptive reader in 1936 might have been struck by the dust jacket's invocation of a term that was coming to be viewed, for many in the world of American poetry, as not just past but passé. When Stevens claims that *Ideas of Order* is "essentially a book of pure poetry," he uses a term that was starting to lose currency, but which had been, during the 1920s, the topic of many widely disseminated essays in America, England, and, most famously, France. The concept of "pure poetry" has its roots in the work of Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Baudelaire, but in the modernist period, the

discussion widened to include writers as varied and significant as Paul Valéry, Henri Brémond, George Moore, T. S. Eliot, Robert Penn Warren, and Benedetto Croce. Broadly defined, pure poetry denotes the element of poetry that is irreducibly poetic, or to put it another way, the aspect of a poem that communicates poetically rather than prosaically, that moves the reader with beauty or “art for art’s sake” rather than content or ideas.² But this broad definition is misleading because there were many different and often conflicting theories of what in a poem was essentially or absolutely poetic. In the 1920s, especially, theorists tended to fall into two major camps. For some writers, most notably Valéry and Moore, poetry was most pure when most objective, when it was burned clean of the personality of the poet and focused on the outside world of things or the contained world of form. Other theorists, led by Brémond, argued that pure poetry had to be subjective, irrupting from moments of inspiration or mystical experience. When Stevens applies the term “pure poetry” to *Ideas of Order*, then, he tosses his latest book into choppy critical waters.

Indeed, the waters were so choppy that Stevens himself gives conflicting opinions about whether the term “pure poetry” is appropriate to *Ideas of Order*. In an October 1935 letter to his publisher, Ronald Lane Latimer, written only a few months prior to the dust jacket discussed above, Stevens states that his work of the 1920s could be classified as “pure poetry,” but in recent years he has tried to write poetry that is more invested in “life.” In response to the claims of many critics that his poetry is “essentially decorative,” he writes:

I was on the point of saying that I did not agree with the opinion that my verse is decorative, when I remembered that when “Harmonium” was in the making there was a time when I liked the idea of images and images alone, or images and the music of verse together. I then believed in *pure poetry*, as it was called.

I still have a distinct liking for that sort of thing. But we live in a different time, and life means a good deal more to us now-a-days than literature does. In the period of which I have just spoken, I thought literature meant most. Moreover, I am not so sure that I don’t think exactly the same thing now, but, unquestionably, I think at the same time that life is the essential part of literature. (L 288)

As in the *Ideas of Order* dust jacket, Stevens is anxious in this letter about the social role of the poet during the Depression, and that anxiety adds to his doubts about pure poetry. But Stevens’ uncertainty about the term extends even deeper, to the definitional level, as can be seen in the fact that he gives very different meanings to the term “pure poetry” in the above two texts. In this letter to Latimer, “pure poetry” means solipsistic

aestheticism removed from life, but in the dust jacket the term denotes a poetics in which “imagination” and “life” can provide a mutual “stimulus” to one another. Indeed, Stevens argues in the letter that his poetry has incorporated “life” only as he has begun to evolve away from pure poetry, but in the dust jacket, the accommodation of “life” to “the imagination” is at the heart of what he means by pure poetry.

These dissonant uses of the term “pure poetry” are instructive. Stevens’ confusion reflects the fact that the writers who had used and debated the term had defined it in murky and conflicting ways. More significantly, in the mid-1930s, Stevens is in a moment of transition. His work is evolving from the aestheticism and playfulness of *Harmonium* to the re-enchanting, cosmological aims of *Ideas of Order* and “Owl’s Clover,” and his attraction to the term “pure poetry” must have been related to the fact that it was used at various times by various critics to describe both of these types of poetry. The term was a nodal point that encompassed both his past and his future.³ A. Walton Litz, discussing the letter I quote above, notes, “It is as if [Stevens] delighted in teasing the ambiguities out of the word ‘pure,’ a process which helped him to define his own aims” (118). I agree with Litz here, although I am not sure that, in the letter and dust jacket, Stevens is “teasing” so much as stumbling through these ambiguities.

In December 1936, however, in his lecture “The Irrational Element in Poetry,” Stevens is much more deliberate in his use of the term “pure poetry.” His lecture deals at length with the theory of pure poetry articulated in the mid-1920s by French scholar Henri Brémont. Brémont’s frequently attacked theory was based on a connection he drew between poetry and mysticism, and Stevens distances himself from Brémont’s theism even as he relies on Brémont’s ideas about poetic creativity to support his claim that poetry can be a secular equivalent to the sacred. For most American poets and critics, the debate over pure poetry registered as little more than a passing fashion, an import from Paris that was all the rage for a season, but for Stevens, the concept catalyzed the development of his theory and poetry in the mid-1930s. In this essay, then, I use Stevens’ interest in the concept of pure poetry as a context for reading the many poems from *Ideas of Order* that dramatize aesthetic experience as a variety of spiritual experience. It is particularly significant that Stevens embraced Brémont, rather than another of the many theorists of pure poetry who were far more reputable and admired, but this is clear only if we look first at the critical history from which the arguments of both Brémont and Stevens had emerged.

By all accounts, the concept of pure poetry originated in Poe’s 1850 essay “The Poetic Principle,” in which he attacks what he calls “the heresy of *The Didactic*,” or the belief that “the ultimate object of all Poetry is Truth.” Poe instead argues that the most “supremely noble” poem is the one “which is a poem and nothing more—this poem written solely for the poem’s sake” (1435–36). Like everything else in Poe, the value of this essay

was first appreciated by the French, and although Poe himself does not use the term “pure poetry” in his essay, Baudelaire and Mallarmé cited him as the progenitor of their own conceptions of *poésie pure*. Baudelaire, like Poe, advocated “ridding poetry of reasoning aimed at truth,” and also felt that pure poetry should “exclude certain types of emotive value,” which were deemed too “vulgar,” in favor of the expression of privileged moments of aesthetic insight or vision (Mossop 83). Mallarmé agreed with Baudelaire that the purest poetry should not be concerned with truth or morality, but he added a new dimension to the theory, and laid the groundwork for one of the central tenets of modernism, when he argued that the pure *poet* must be impersonal and disappear behind his work. In his essay *Crise de Vers*, Mallarmé writes, “If the poem is to be pure, the poet’s voice must be stilled and the initiative taken by the words themselves, which will be set in motion as they meet unequally in collision. And in an exchange of gleams they will flame out like some glittering swath of fire sweeping over precious stones, and thus replace the audible breathing in lyric poetry of old—replace the poet’s own personal and passionate control of verse” (40–41).

The major ideas that Baudelaire and Mallarmé amended to Poe’s argument—a valuation of irrational moments of aesthetic insight and a demand for impersonality—cast a broad shadow over modernist conceptions of pure poetry. Mallarmé, along with the intermediating influence of Eliot’s early essays on poetic impersonality, clearly impacted the major text on pure poetry written in English in the 1920s, George Moore’s introduction to his 1924 anthology, *Pure Poetry*. Moore defines pure poetry as “something that the poet creates outside of his own personality” (22), and he uses this definition as the theoretical justification for his anthology’s anti-Victorian revision of the canon (Théophile Gautier and Poe in; Keats and Tennyson⁴ out). Valéry also extended the association of pure poetry with impersonality by arguing that the poet “is a pure technician,” whose concern should not be the exposition of ideas, but rather an absolute and self-enclosed aestheticism that willfully elides meaning (Mossop 199). In the 1920 foreword to a collection of poems by Lucien Fabre, Valéry argues that the poet who travels toward the “horizon” of “pure poetry,” and who therefore “leans toward the extreme rigors of art,” must seek to produce “a beauty ever more conscious of its origins, ever more independent of all *subjects*, and of the vulgar attractions of sentiment as well as the blatant effects of eloquence” (*The Art of Poetry* 46). However, he was also careful to note that an absolutely pure poem was an impossibility. In an essay published in the *New York Herald-Tribune* in 1928, Valéry states, “I regard the idea of pure poetry as being essentially analytic. It is, in short, a fiction deduced from observation, which is intended to help in defining our idea of poems in general” (1). Pure poetry in this sense is less an aesthetic program than a theoretical limit case that allows a critic to differentiate poetry from “the most direct and most insensitive expression of a thought”

(1). He goes on to note that, in the terms he is using, music is far more “pure” than poetry because musical notes are an abstract, non-referential language that can be defined and reproduced in a “constant and identical fashion,” whereas “for the poet there has been no constructor of scales; he has no tuning fork or metronome. No certainty exists in his realm; his only rude instruments are grammar and the dictionary” (8).

The first major strand of the theory of pure poetry, then, involved impersonal and even objective conceptions of poetry that were suggested by Poe’s argument that a poem should be “written solely for the poem’s sake.” However, a much more subjective tendency was also lurking in Poe’s essay in his fascination with what he calls the “Poetic Sentiment,” or the flash of irrational insight occasioned in the poet or the reader by encounters with “supernal Loveliness” (1437). These aesthetic flashes are “pure”—they are free of didactic or moralistic content—but Poe’s claim that poetry stems from “an elevating excitement of the *Soul*” hints at the possibility of a theory of pure poetry that would be experiential rather than objective (1453).⁵ In the 1920s, the most significant theory of the *experience* of pure poetry was that of the Abbé Henri Brémond, a French literary scholar famous for his six-volume history of French Religious Literature. Brémond’s conflation of mysticism and poetics catalyzed the modernist discussion of pure poetry, and certainly guided Stevens’ understanding of the term.

Brémond took the idea that poetry ought not to be didactic to mean that truly pure poetry must not present ideas, and, on an even more fundamental level, that the most purely poetic aspects of a poem have nothing to do with rational communication: “To say that poetry cannot be didactic is to say that the poet as such is not, and cannot be, a man who endeavors to communicate his ideas” (*Prayer & Poetry* 74). Poets, he argued, should “pursue this ineffable experience, clinging to the mane of their ancient Pegasus, intoxicating themselves at their ancient fountain” (*Prayer & Poetry* 79). Brémond’s fascination with irrational moments of inspiration is nothing new in poetic theory, of course, but his singularity lies in how many aspects of poetry he declared to be inessential to inspiration, and therefore impure. Not only didacticism, but also the sonic, imagistic, or symbolic qualities of a poem are impure, since all of these can be explained by rational analysis of a poem (Decker 19). Indeed, Brémond’s sense of the fundamental impurity of language led him to conclude that “la poésie pure est silence” (Preface xxi). Yet, this does not mean that Brémond felt that pure poetry did not exist. Instead, he argued that pure poetry was a non- or pre-linguistic mystical state experienced by the poet immediately prior to writing a poem, or by the reader during an encounter with a poem. As Henry Decker notes, for Brémond, “The poetic effect of poetry, reaching far beneath our surface faculties, is thus the stirring of that *zone profonde* where inspiration is engendered. What in a poem does not have this effect, is not essential to it as poetry” (20). “[T]rue poetry,” Brémond

argues, somehow bypasses all the normal denotative effects of language and affects us "in a region in which intellectual curiosity has nothing to do" (*Prayer & Poetry* 58). The essentially poetic matter of a poem impacts the reader "up to the central zone, the access of which is forbidden to all didacticisms, however eloquent; the poet's *Anima* stimulates this deeper self of the reader, elevates it, and associates it with the poet's own experience" (*Prayer & Poetry* 159). It is important to note that the connection Brémond draws between poetry and religious experience is not a metaphor, but rather an argument of identity: pure poetry is a mystical experience that is of the same type, but finally less profound than, a true religious experience: "the poet in the last resort is but an evanescent mystic whose mysticism breaks down" (*Prayer & Poetry* 188–89).

Brémond's arguments set off a widespread debate in French literary circles that even reached America when his chief rival, Paul Souday, wrote in *The New York Times* that Brémond is an "extremely chimerical" theorist who "treats reason like a personal enemy" (9).⁶ By the 1930s, however, the furor had subsided, and many critics expressed open disdain for the era of debates over pure poetry. Speaking at Oxford, Benedetto Croce noted that, if "ideas" are to be excluded from poetry, then Homer, Sophocles, Dante, and Shakespeare would not qualify as "pure poets" (703). He worried, furthermore, that poetry that followed the dictates of pure poetry "would be nothing but a voluptuous thrill leading only to satiety, and comparable . . . to barren sensuality, bearing no fruit in the life of the soul. It could receive nothing from thought or will and could give them nothing" (704). In America during the Depression, leftist critics tended to dismiss pure poetry as part of the excessive solipsism and aestheticism of the twenties. Max Eastman argued that, although pure poetry had some artistic value, it had led in the 1920s to a "Cult of Unintelligibility" (92). Malcolm Cowley similarly wrote in *Exile's Return*, his 1934 memoir of the Lost Generation, that pure poetry was symptomatic of the ways that even the most brilliant modernists had carried the idea of art for art's sake to ultimately "futile" extremes of "anti-human" obscurity and aloofness (141–45). This leftist distrust of pure poetry extended even to poets who admired Stevens. Stanley Burnshaw, in his famous review of *Ideas of Order* in *The New Masses*, writes that, in the 1920s, "It was tacitly assumed that one read [Stevens] for pure poetic sensation," and although he admires the "strange amazing crystal" of *Harmonium*, Burnshaw nevertheless feels, "It is the kind of verse that people concerned with the murderous world collapse can hardly swallow today except in tiny doses" (355). Theodore Roethke evinces similar hesitations about Stevens in a 1936 review in *The New Republic*, when he writes, "It is a pity that such a rich and special sensibility should be content with the order of words and music, and not project itself more vigorously upon the present-day world" (305).

When Stevens begins, in the mid-1930s, to develop his own critical response to the debate on pure poetry, he is clearly a few years late to the

party. The advantage of his belatedness, however, is that he had no rhetorical obligation to position himself along a rigidly drawn party line, but could instead freely borrow and amend the ideas he found useful. In his lecture "The Irrational Element in Poetry," Stevens uses Brémond's mystical poetics to help formulate his own secular conception of poetry commensurate to spiritual experience. The lecture, delivered at Harvard in December 1936, has generally been disparaged by Stevens' critics—Litz, for instance, argues, "It is diffuse, rhetorical, and somewhat anxious in tone" (115). Stevens himself even seems to have sensed this diffuseness, when he notes in his conclusion, "I use the word irrational more or less indifferently, as between its several uses" (792). Part of what he means by "irrational" is "unconscious," and a large portion of his time is spent ruminating on Freud and the role of the unconscious mind in poetic creativity. Stevens turns to Brémond, however, in order to help him answer a question much closer to his own heart: "Why does one write poetry?" (785). Stevens writes, "In his discourse before the Academy, ten years or more ago, M. Brémond elucidated a mystical motive and made it clear that, in his opinion, one writes poetry to find God" (785). Although Stevens admits that he does not share Brémond's overtly theological concerns, he cites Brémond extensively as he explains his own reasons for writing poetry:

M. Brémond proposed the identity of poetry and prayer, and followed Bergson in relying, in the last analysis, on faith. M. Brémond eliminated reason as the essential element in poetry. Poetry in which the irrational element dominated was pure poetry. M. Brémond himself does not permit any looseness in the expression pure poetry, which he confines to a very small body of poetry, as he should, if the lines in which he recognizes it are as precious to his spirit as they appear to be. In spite of M. Brémond, pure poetry is a term that has grown to be descriptive of poetry in which not the true subject but the poetry of the subject is paramount. All mystics approach God through the irrational. Pure poetry is both mystical and irrational. If we descend a little from this height and apply the looser and broader definition of pure poetry, it is possible to say that, while it can lie in the temperament of very few of us to write poetry in order to find God, it is probably the purpose of each of us to write poetry to find the good which, in the Platonic sense, is synonymous with God. One writes poetry, then, in order to approach the good in what is harmonious and orderly. Or, simply, one writes poetry out of a delight in the harmonious and orderly. (785–86)

Stevens begins this passage talking about "faith," and a leap of poetic faith is where the passage ends, as he proffers the counterintuitive propo-

sition that embracing “the irrational” will allow the poet to “approach . . . the harmonious and orderly.” Certainly, Stevens is playing fast and loose when he invokes Plato, for whom the discovery of harmony and order was most assuredly not the result of an irrational process (or, for that matter, a poetic process). Stevens and Brémond, like Plato, attempt to imagine how one could comprehend something that is indescribable (pure poetry, the form of the good), but for Stevens this comprehension is the result of an irrational epiphany rather than dialectical reason. When Stevens suggests, then, that the poet finds the Platonic good through something akin to a religious experience, he mystifies Plato even as he secularizes Brémond.

However, in spite of the fact that Stevens backs away from Brémond’s theology, it is nevertheless apparent that he shares with Brémond a belief that the language of religious experience can be a vital terminology for poetic theory.⁷ For instance, Stevens claims that we can “find in poetry that which gives us a momentary existence on an exquisite plane” (786). Poets, Stevens argues, search for “a freedom not previously experienced, a poetry not previously conceived of, [which] may occur with the suddenness inherent in poetic metamorphosis. For poets, that possibility is the ultimate obsession. They purge themselves before reality, in the meantime, in what they intend to be saintly exercises” (790).

The final sentence of this passage is befuddling even by the considerable standards of the debate on pure poetry, and I am not sure it is possible to state definitively what Stevens means. When he invokes “saintly exercises,” he continues the metaphorical linkage between poetic revelation and mysticism that fills the essay. Indeed, the link the sentence draws between ascetic self-denial and otherworldly insight has a Catholic bent to it that suggests the degree to which Brémond colored Stevens’ thinking. But beyond those readily apparent readings, the passage is murky. What does it mean to say that poets “purge themselves before reality”? The idea that writing can be a sort of pouring forth is not terribly unusual, but the “purging” Stevens describes is not pure poetry, since in his account it happens “in the meantime,” while the poet waits for a sudden “poetic metamorphosis.” “Reality” is perhaps the word most in need of parsing. Although Stevens discusses Plato in this lecture, by “reality” he does not seem to mean the Platonic real, but its opposite: the prosaic or every day. Earlier in the essay, Stevens elucidates “the transaction between reality and the sensibility of the poet” by describing how a fairly mundane scene of a Hartford winter (a cat running on some snow) became for him a “pre-text” for a poem (781–82). If reality, then, is the every day, purging oneself before it would seem to denote an ascetic focus on the facts of the world undertaken in the hopes that a flourish of imagination would result.

There is a stimulus-response logic governing Stevens’ conception of reality and the imagination in this lecture (elsewhere he talks about an Arthur Rimbaud poem that was inspired by an American circus) that is, in and of itself, not especially interesting, and is a mere cartoon of the

complex relationship between the world and the aesthetic depicted in his best poetry. What is significant about this lecture, however, is that it is a pragmatic revision of Brémond's ideas about poetic revelation. I use "pragmatic" here partly to echo its philosophical sense, but I primarily mean it in its everyday sense. Brémond, after all, was a theorist and historian, but Stevens is a poet, and he is trying to explain how poems actually get made. "Reality," then, gets introduced into the essay as a sphere of mundane things that can spur the poet to create, but in his next section, he shifts to reality as a political or historical category, and argues that political reality can be both a stumbling block and a source of obligation: "The pressure of the contemporaneous from the time of the beginning of the World War to the present time has been constant and extreme. No one can have lived apart in a happy oblivion" (788). If "happy oblivion" is impossible in the modernist era, then the pure poet's "momentary existence on an exquisite plane" must be a more complicated, or even morally dubious, thing to achieve. Stevens states that "reality"—the external world of objects, events, and ideas—is as essential to poetry as the imagination. From Brémond's perspective, "reality" as Stevens defines it would be impure, but Stevens insists that poetry emerges from both the imagination and the "pressure of the contemporaneous." Stevens' secularization of Brémond is perhaps best exemplified when he differentiates poets from priests in a manner that even Whitman, trumpeter of the claim that poets are the new priests, most likely would have appreciated: "The poet cannot profess the irrational as the priest professes the unknown. The poet's role is broader, because he must be possessed, along with everything else, by the earth and by men in their earthy implications" (792). In short, then, Stevens argues that poets must have some converse with the "mystical and irrational" experience of pure poetry, but he also makes a case that poetry cannot be absolutely pure.

This brings me back to *Ideas of Order*, the book Stevens had published a year prior to this lecture, and which, in the various documents quoted at the beginning of this essay, he identifies as both a book of pure poetry and a book that has evolved beyond pure poetry. In my estimation, *Ideas of Order* is actually far more complicated and interesting than Stevens suggests in either of these readings. *Ideas of Order* is not, by any of the definitions discussed above, a book of pure poetry—indeed, its claim to be a book of "ideas" already violates Poe's cardinal rule. What it is, however, is a book *about* pure poetry that repeatedly dramatizes its misgivings about and even its inability to be pure poetry. Over and over again, Stevens either speaks of pure poetic expression as a hypothetical ideal, hedged about with words such as "may" and "perhaps," or he places the speakers of the poems outside of and looking in upon the subjective space of "mystical and irrational" aesthetic experience. When he attempts to describe more directly something akin to the experience of inspiration that so fascinated Poe and Brémond, he tends to meditate on what he calls, in "The

American Sublime," "The empty spirit / In vacant space" (107), with a particular emphasis on the emptiness and vacancy of creative solitude. In *Ideas of Order*, Stevens is fascinated, as was Brémond, by the idea that poetry in its essence is not linguistic—repeatedly he imagines poetry as pure sound, pure experience, a pure channeling of the world—but the speakers of his poems do not actually produce this non-linguistic poetic ideal. They stand apart from their object of study, framed in Stevens' measured language, and meditate ambivalently on the idea of a comprehension that goes deeper than language.

Part of what makes *Ideas of Order* so amenable to Brémond's terminology of intense subjective experience is that it is a deeply lonely book. A significant number of the poems present a speaker who stands by himself and describes a static natural landscape,⁸ but even when Stevens moves to ostensibly social spaces, they tend to be either abandoned, such as the old casino in "Academic Discourse at Havana," or alienating, as in "Farewell to Florida," where urban crowds are first described as "a slime of men," then as a tide "moving as the water moves" (98). The obvious exception to this rule is the book's most exceptional poem, "The Idea of Order at Key West," but even there, the speaker's turn to address "Ramon Fernandez" feels more like a stage direction in a closet drama than a moment of naturalistic intersubjective connection. For the most part, this Stevensian solitude is not leavened by the humor that makes the reader feel like a more welcome overhearer of the lyrics in *Harmonium*, or the discursive, essayistic tone that makes his later, longer poems seem less hermetically sealed. This, I think, has something to do with why Stevens' critics have tended to rate *Ideas of Order* below many of his other books—certainly it lies behind Roy Harvey Pearce's complaint that the reader of *Ideas of Order* is "essentially an onlooker" to Stevens' various observations and is never called upon to "face his own special human predicament" (390).

Yet, the solitary speakers depicted in these poems evince, with a directness atypical of Stevens, his anxiety about the nature of a poet's calling in a disenchanting world. Stevens is not alone in his poems about nature in the same way that the romantics were alone. Wordsworth, transfixed before a vertiginous cliff-face in Book One of *The Prelude*, feels the "Wisdom and Spirit of the universe!" as the "fellowship" of Nature helps him feel "A grandeur in the beatings of the heart" (59). It is immediately apparent in the opening stanza of "Botanist on Alp (No. 1)" that Stevens experiences a different sort of nature:

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

Stevens is frequently praised for his lyricism, but looking at this stanza, one is reminded that his best lines are often deadpan rather than musical. There is an obvious comic disconnection when such ponderous, epochal declamations involve a word as jarringly unpoetic as “funicular,” and I hope that Stevens meant for us to smile as we puzzled over the word “on” (are we forbidden to write an “Ode: On the Funicular,” or are we forbidden to write an Ode while on the funicular?). Yet, for a poet as steeped in romanticism as Stevens, the world must seem diminished when panoramas, apostrophes, and nature can exist only as fodder for slight ironies of tone. This theme of diminishment appears again in “Autumn Refrain,” where Stevens describes the Keatsian nightingale, inspiration for “measureless measures,” as being “not a bird for me / But the name of a bird and the name of a nameless air / I have never—shall never hear” (129).

But “Autumn Refrain” does not end on these lines bemoaning poetic deafness. Instead, the second half of the fourteen-line poem turns to describe a far more complicated account of a hearing beneath hearing. Stevens writes:

And yet beneath
The stillness of everything gone, and being still,
Being and sitting still, something resides,
Some skreaking and skittering residuum,
And grates these evasions of the nightingale
Though I have never—shall never hear that bird.
And the stillness is in the key, all of it is,
The stillness is all in the key of that desolate sound. (129)

Anthony Whiting has noted the thematic link between this and Stevens’ other famous lyric about barrenness, “The Snow Man” (Whiting 63), but it is striking how much more replete—with its “junipers shagged with ice” and “spruces rough in the distant glitter / Of the January sun” (8)—is that poem of winter than this poem of autumn. In “The Snow Man,” the world’s apparent visual blankness nevertheless reveals something undeniably beautiful to the sufficiently attentive poet, but in “Autumn Refrain,” the idea of aural blankness brings a sadness, even a terror, that can be felt in the phrase that, repeated twice, becomes a sort of dread chorus: “I have never—shall never hear.” The turn in the poem’s second half suggests, though, that even in the “stillness of everything gone,” the speaker hears something. The something he hears is not pleasant—a “skreaking and skittering residuum”—and it is also, significantly, a “residuum,” not an actual sound but a clanging memory of the “The skreak and skitter of evening gone” produced by grackles just before nightfall in the first line of the poem. The poem ends, then, with the speaker alone in the night, remembering the bare traces of a song and tuning it to the stillness of the world—solipsism set in the key of solitude. This conclusion can be read

either as a frightening vision of the sterility of a pure poetry of subjective experience, or as a sort of minor victory, where the modern poet willing to resign himself to the song that will suffice survives and continues to sing to a disenchanting world, unlike Keats's speaker, who sinks into oblivion under the weight of too much abundance. Harold Bloom once described Stevens' "fear of his own capacity for solipsistic transport" (52–53), and that fear, I think, accounts for the ambivalence of this poem, where the speaker is not transported but fixed (though not, importantly, transfixed) as he imagines a moment of aesthetic experience that is pure precisely in Brémond's sense that "La poésie pure est silence" (xxiii).

Whereas "Autumn Refrain" is an ironically musical title for a poem that meditates on silence, "The Reader" takes place in an unlit room at night, and the action it describes can hardly be called "reading" in any typical sense of the term:

All night I sat reading a book,
Sat reading as if in a book
Of sombre pages.

It was autumn and falling stars
Covered the shriveled forms
Crouched in the moonlight.

No lamp was burning as I read,
A voice was mumbling, "Everything
Falls back to coldness,

Even the musky muscadines,
The melons, the vermilion pears
Of the leafless garden." (118)

The "book" this reader reads, like Brémond's pure poetry, is not in any way linguistic. In the final tercet, we discover that there are no words on the page ("The sombre pages bore no print"); instead the reader is reading "the trace of burning stars / In the frosty heaven" (118). These lines recall the Protestant practice of reading the world as God's second book, but here the text of the world reveals a vacant cosmos. Stevens' reader observes a "frosty heaven" looming over a world of "shriveled forms" where an ostensibly prophetic voice does not declaim but "mumbl[es]" the message, " 'Everything / Falls back to coldness.' " This is not a poem about an idea of order, but an idea of entropy. Brémond, as discussed above, enthusiastically endorsed the "ineffable experience" that he felt poetry could produce when it goes beneath our rational faculties and into what he called the "central zone" of subjectivity. Stevens lets us feel the allure of this type of experience when he has the mumbling "voice" of revelation

speak in four lines filled with lush imagery and overt alliteration that contrast to the austere tone of the rest of the poem. However, the poem ends with austerity in its invocation of a “frosty heaven,” and we are left to understand that the ineffable experience of the reader is ineffable because it signifies nothing beyond itself. This does not mean this experience is without value—even in a frosty heaven, the stars are “burning,” and if this cosmos is empty, it nevertheless has a chilly beauty in Stevens’ presentation. But the poem, in spite of being in the first person, feels distant from the pure poetic experience it describes, as though Stevens is observing himself observing and probing the possibilities and limitations of a metaphysics centered on aesthetics.

“Mozart, 1935,” another poem about the spiritual uses of art, is as energetic as “The Reader” is subdued. It is also very different from the poems discussed above because, instead of dramatizing (and to some extent idealizing) the creative mind in isolation, Stevens thinks about the artist’s place in the tattered social fabric of the Depression. However, as in “Autumn Refrain” or “The Reader,” Stevens imagines poetry that, at least in the first three lines, does not aspire to signification. The poem begins:

Poet, be seated at the piano.
Play the present, its hoo-hoo-hoo,
Its shoo-shoo-shoo, its ric-a-nic,
Its envious cachinnation.

If they throw stones upon the roof
While you practice arpeggios,
It is because they carry down the stairs
A body in rags.
Be seated at the piano. (107)

These two stanzas describe very different things—the music within, the mob without—but the word “cachinnation” is the pivot point that holds the poem together. Aurally, “cachinnation” seems initially to be of a piece with the nonsense jazz terms in the preceding lines, but unlike “hoo-hoo-hoo” or “ric-a-nic”—two notably pure-poetic phrases—it is an actual word, meaning “laughter.” Specifically in this line, it is “envious” laughter, and the specter of envy hangs over the poem as we turn to the angry mob in the next stanza. The tone of the second stanza aims at calming the apprehensions of the “poet” Stevens has summoned. Stevens assures the poet that the cachinnating “they” are throwing stones at the roof not because they are out for his blood, but rather the blood of the corpse being borne down the stairs, and therefore there is still an opportunity to “Be seated at the piano.” This visceral fear of angry, dispossessed hordes is also registered in the other poem in *Ideas of Order* that deals overtly with the Depression, “Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz”:

There are these sudden mobs of men,

These sudden clouds of faces and arms,
An immense suppression, freed,
These voices crying without knowing for what,

Except to be happy, without knowing how,
Imposing forms they cannot describe,
Requiring order beyond their speech. (100)

There is something decidedly patrician in the claim that the masses require “order beyond their speech,” and reducing suffering people to “sudden clouds of faces and arms” does not necessarily suggest sympathetic fellow-feeling. But before I give my reading over entirely to potshots at Stevens’ moral failings, it is worth examining what he thinks are the responsibilities of the pure poet who is compelled by circumstances to “Play the present,” and in order to do that, I need to give Stevens a chance to say his piece. This is what he requests of the poet seated at the piano in “Mozart, 1935”:

Be thou the voice,
Not you. Be thou, be thou
The voice of angry fear,
The voice of this besieging pain.

Be thou that wintry sound
As of the great wind howling,
By which sorrow is released,
Dismissed, absolved
In a starry placating. (107–08)

Stevens’ proposed response to suffering is catharsis; specifically, a musical or lyric catharsis, wherein the poet produces a primeval sound “As of the great wind howling” that channels and even “placat[es]” the collective “howling” of the masses. This is literally the precise opposite of Brémond’s dictum that the purest poetry is silence, and yet this “wintry sound” does seem to be free of ideas and completely given over to emotion. Stevens suggests, then, that the refined artist (figured here as a classical pianist) has been interrupted from the pursuit of art for art’s sake by external events, but he can now offer to the world something that, although it is not art for its own sake, is not really art for any practical purpose either, except that it grants people the experience of being collectively stirred. Stevens consciously echoes Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” with the repeated phrase “Be thou,” but although Stevens’ conclusion is comparably cathartic to Shelley’s, it does not share Shelley’s invocation of renewal. Stevens’

“wintry sound” does not carry, at least explicitly, the promise of a Spring to come, and it therefore must be sufficient unto itself to placate sorrow.

Two of Stevens’ most perceptive readers of the last fifteen years have approached “Mozart, 1935” differently. Mark Halliday feels that the poem evinces a lack of interpersonal sympathy, as he argues, “We notice that [the poet’s] achievement of a starry placating is not to involve any attempt to change the social conditions that have brought others’ pain to Stevens’ attention. Sorrow is not to be remedied, nor even alleviated, but ‘released / Dismissed, absolved . . .’ We should wonder why suffering should need absolution—is it sinful?” (16). Alan Filreis takes a different approach, and argues that Stevens is attempting to salvage the lyric for a decade where lyric solitude seemed increasingly impossible: “[The return to lyric] was to be accomplished not by shutting out of one’s lyric the streets full of cries, fear, and anger and the throwing of stones, but rather by giving voice to these elements within a lyric that had made a theme of its own potential loss” (215). I think both critics make valid points. It is clear that Stevens’ response to economic troubles is as much fear of the dispossessed as it is fear for the dispossessed, and I do not think it is unfair to see something cynical in the idea that the masses require “placating.” What Filreis points to, however, is how much Stevens’ fear is really a fear for the future of poetry. Both in the general sense that massive poverty made the cloistered lyric poet seem like a privileged anachronism, and in the more direct sense that modernism and pure poetry both came under attack from literary critics during the thirties, Stevens felt in a new way the need to reimagine what his poetry could do. “Mozart, 1935” insists that poetry has to engage the world on some level, but it cannot engage it too journalistically or ideologically or it will cease to do what poetry does. If poetry is escapist—if it “releases” or “absolves”—it is because Stevens felt that the world needed escaping from, and ultimately all that he could offer the rest of us was the chance to escape with him.

Thus far, I have looked at a set of poems in which Stevens figures poetry as something that, in its abstract essence, either evades or exceeds the use of actual words. In “The Reader,” the reader reads a book with nothing written in it; in “Mozart, 1935,” the speaker encourages the “poet” to create a cacophony that detaches itself from the signifying capacity of language. In some poems, then, Stevens figures a poetics of silence, in others a poetics of music, and thus he recalls the metaphors used to describe pure poetry in Brémond and Valéry, respectively. Where his emphasis differs from these writers, however, is in his sense of the limitations of a pure poetics. Whether in the poems that evince a terror of creative solitude, such as “The Reader” or “Autumn Refrain,” or the poems that try to enunciate a way that poetry could engage with politics or history, such as “Mozart, 1935,” the speakers of *Ideas of Order* recoil from an absolute surrender to the aesthetic. Stevens always argued that poetry could reshape the reader’s perceptions and thus give order to a chaotic world, but the

sense of order he tries to invoke, particularly in this book, is contingent upon keeping an analytic distance from aesthetic experience. Nowhere in *Ideas of Order* would a speaker ever ask, as Keats does, "Do I wake or sleep?" Stevens is always wide awake, and his insistence on speakers who anatomize and discern underscores just how inadequate the terminology of pure poetry is to the actual poems of *Ideas of Order*.

"The Idea of Order at Key West" resembles the above poems in that its speaker stands apart from a work of art (specifically, a song sung by a woman on a beach) so that he can appraise and categorize its aesthetic qualities. Through the first five stanzas of the poem, if any experience of pure poetry is taking place, it is only in the experience of the singer, who "Knew that there never was a world for her / Except the one she sang, and, singing, made" (106). In these early stanzas, even as the speaker seeks to define the singer's solitary experience, he does not ever share it. The rhetoric of these early stanzas is characterized by questions that the speaker posits and then answers with a series of logical deductions. However, the poem shifts tonally in its final two stanzas, which describe the disorientation of the speaker's senses after he has heard the singer's song. These lines might seem to describe some sort of accommodation to subjective aesthetic experience, but I hope to show that they actually present a compelling case for why Brémond's language of pure poetry could never satisfy Stevens. The aesthetic experience Stevens valorizes in these lines does not cycle through a closed circuit in the mind but is instead charged by a synthetic relationship between the creative energies of the artist and a secular yet re-enchanted world. In short, the poem stands apart from pure poetry in its first half by being detached and rational, and in its second half, it imagines a variety of aesthetic experience that is impure in its synthesis of subjects and objects. In the closing lines, concepts and figures that had been sharply delineated from one another throughout the poem suddenly clang together, suggesting a poetics that is impure because its demarcations are ghostly rather than sharp. Before I can demonstrate why it is interesting that Stevens mixes things together in the poem's denouement, however, I need to show the ways that he holds things apart in the opening stanzas.

The speaker's insistence on differentiation is apparent in the poem's first line, "She sang beyond the genius of the sea." This line is certainly easy to remember, with its crisp declarative sentence written in an understated pentameter, but Stevens' placement of "She" as the subject of the opening sentence elides the fact that the first stanza is primarily about the sea. Stevens continues,

The water never formed to mind or voice,
Like a body wholly body, fluttering
Its empty sleeves; and yet its mimic motion
Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry,

That was not ours although we understood,
Inhuman, of the veritable ocean. (105)

This first stanza gives us the complete *dramatis personae* of this meticulously blocked poem: "She," the singer on the beach; "the sea," which competes sonically with the singer; and "we," the speaker of the poem and his silent companion, who observe the scene. The speaker here places the sea on center stage, presenting it as "Inhuman," a "body wholly body" that seems, with its "empty sleeves," to be only torso, a brute muscular force without the dexterity (or the ability to be a "maker") afforded by limbs. It is the "veritable ocean," a palpably real thing that makes meaningless noise in the form of a "constant cry" that "never formed to mind or voice." The ocean, then, is alien from the other actors in the poem, the speaker and the singer, due to its absolute thingness, and it is also a sort of *reductio ad absurdum* of pure poetry, as the noise of its "constant cry" is devoid of content. The sea as imagined by the speaker is estranged from us, anthropomorphized in a manner so visceral, corporeal, and even amputated ("body wholly body," "empty sleeves," "constant cry") that the stanza seems calculated to short-circuit the very impulse toward the pathetic fallacy that often motivates poetic anthropomorphizing. By the end of the poem, Stevens will give us reason to read suspiciously the speaker's categorical insistence that there can be no interpenetration among himself, the singer, and the natural other. But initially, our experience of the poem is governed by the speaker's severe logic of division.

The predominant tone of the first half of the poem is rhetorical, if by rhetorical we mean that it lays out an argument and tries to convince us of it, and yet this rhetorical tone feels, at times, a bit out of step with how metrically and aesthetically wrought the poem is. In the second stanza, the speaker states, "The song and water were not medleyed sound / Even if what she sang was what she heard, / Since what she sang was uttered word by word" (105). This tercet buried within the poem is so tightly crafted, with its parallel construction that places "song," "sang," and "sang" in each line ahead of "sound," "heard," and "word," that its artistry might tend to distract a reader from its argument, which boils down to a claim that although the singer and the ocean both produce "sound," the singer's song is "uttered word by word," and thus is distinct from the ocean's meaningless noise. As he puts it in the third stanza, "she was the maker of the song she sang. / The ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea / Was merely a place by which she walked to sing" (105). In these stanzas, Stevens picks up a question he raises elsewhere in *Ideas of Order*, specifically in "Academic Discourse at Havana," where he asks, "Is the function of the poet here mere sound, / Subtler than the ornatest prophecy, / To stuff the ear?" (116). Stevens concludes that poem by answering himself that the poet is no mere ear-stuffer, but rather is possessed of the power to "reconcile us to our selves" with "dark, pacific words" (117).

In "The Idea of Order at Key West," the issue of poetic ear-stuffing seems, on its surface, to be resolved with the speaker's repeated claims that the maker's song, with its verbal content, is different from the attention-grabbing but ultimately meaningless noise of the ocean. Yet, this poem does not lack for sonic theatrics, most notably at the close of the second stanza, where the speaker adds a caveat to his broader argument: "It may be that in all her phrases stirred / The grinding water and the gasping wind; / But it was she and not the sea we heard" (105). A critic should be careful not to go overboard with an instrument so blunt as *mi-mesis*, but it seems clear to me that the speaker evokes waves crashing on the beach in the heavily stressed alliteration of "the grinding water and the gasping wind." That he does this at the precise moment when he states that he "may" be wrong in drawing a sharp line between art and nature is a prime example of how slippery this poem is. The speaker of the poem tries, at least in his early stanzas, to make a reasoned argument about aesthetics in the form of a lyric poem, but in these particular lines his lyricism is more appropriate to his reservations than to his stated purpose. Do we, then, read Stevens' sonic evocation of the ocean as a moment in which the speaker playfully acknowledges the limits of the sharp division he wants to draw between art and nature? Or is it that Stevens is using the sound of his verse to suggest that we ought to read his speaker suspiciously?

Many prominent readers of the poem have gone even further, arguing that the poem's mix of lyricism, rhetoric, and irony renders it virtually impenetrable. A passage that has been cited more than once in subsequent critics (not least, I suspect, because it throws down the gauntlet) comes from Bloom, who argues that "the *Key West* poem has its desperate equivocations and its unresolvable difficulties, more perhaps than even so strong a poem can sustain. In some respects, it is an impossible text to interpret, and its rhetoric may be at variance with its deepest intentionality" (93). As is typical of a Bloomian reading, he imagines a Stevens who is willful and ingenious, but not entirely in control of his self-contradictions. Helen Vendler, on the other hand, describes Stevens as a calculating prankster:

The structure of the poem is ostensibly one of logical discrimination, but actually the complicated progressions . . . simply serve to implicate the various alternatives ever more deeply with each other so that the sea, the girl, the water, the song, the wind, the air, the sky and cloud, the voices of the spectators, all become indistinguishable from each other, as Stevens wants them to be. . . . Stevens uses logical form here not as a logician but as a sleight-of-hand man, making assertion appear in different guises and from different angles, delighting in paradoxical logic, and sometimes defying logic entirely. (175)

The general idea that the stated argument of the poem is at odds with its poetic treatment continues into readings from more recent schools of criticism, as when Aaron McCullough states, in his Deleuzian reading of what he calls the poem's "schizophrenic" nature, "This disjunction between intention and meaning keeps [the poem] vital" (99–100).

I quote the above critics because I largely agree with their shared sense of the poem's internal tensions, and in particular I am convinced by Vendler's account of Stevens as a "sleight-of-hand man," which strikes me as more attuned to the puzzles and pleasures of his poetry than does the high-blown bombast of the Bloomian crisis lyric. Another thing these three critics have in common, which might not initially seem notable, is that they refer to the speaker of the poem as "Stevens." This is not, of course, an outrageous approach; Stevens wrote little in his career that could be called a dramatic monologue in the classic sense of the term, and where there are named characters in his poems, they tend not to be given speaking roles. But I want to argue that it is useful, as a thought experiment if nothing else, to think of the speaker of the poem emphatically as "the speaker," as an aesthetic construct with a voice separate from the poet's, who is simply one character among several characters in the poem, and whose point of view should not be taken definitively to be that of Stevens. This approach has the virtue of providing a critical lever that can help make some artistic sense of the fact that the analytical rhetoric of the speaker does not seem entirely appropriate to the Stevensian lyricism in which it is voiced. Indeed, the two registers often function as counterpoints to one another. At one point in the poem, Stevens states that, for the woman, "The sea was not a mask," and although I do not think that the speaker is a mask for Stevens—at least not in the sense that Tennyson's Ulysses or Eliot's Tereias are masks—the speaker is a pose for Stevens, a pose to which I imagine he is at least partially sympathetic, but a pose that he assumes so that he can think through and beyond its limitations.

One moment in the poem where critics would benefit from reading the speaker suspiciously is when he asks at the end of the third stanza, "Whose spirit is this? we said, because we knew / It was the spirit that we sought and knew / That we should ask this often as she sang" (105). Part of the problem here is simply that these lines are confusing, since "this" lacks any clear grammatical referent (it seems to mean the song, or perhaps the pure poetic essence of the song). The more substantial issue, though, is that the speaker has a naive certainty in "the spirit" as a replete, locatable essence of an object or a person. This sense of the word "spirit" is very much at odds with the way that "spirit" is used elsewhere in *Ideas of Order*. In the next poem in the book, "The American Sublime," Stevens concludes:

But how does one feel?
One grows used to the weather,
The landscape and that;

And the sublime comes down
To the spirit itself,

The spirit and space,
The empty spirit
In vacant space.
What wine does one drink?
What bread does one eat? (105)

The speaker of "Key West" imagines both spirit and space to be charged. They both have, as he states in the first line, a "genius," and even if the sea is a "body wholly body," it is also, just a few lines later, "ever-hooded, tragic gestured." Throughout Stevens' poetry, however, from early poems such as "Sunday Morning" and "The Snow Man" to later ones such as the works I have discussed in this section, the world is a spiritual *tabula rasa*, vacant of any meaning until we put it there, and our own spirits are fundamentally "empty," not a thing to be sought but a thing to be constructed. As Stevens states in another *Ideas of Order* poem, "Evening Without Angels," "Air is air. / Its vacancy glitters round us everywhere. / Its sounds are not angelic syllables / But our unfashioned spirits realized / More sharply in more furious selves" (111). In the final stanzas of "The Idea of Order at Key West," the poem moves to this idea that the spirit is not essential, not a discoverable transhistorical essence, but a projected and particular product of the imagination. Early in the poem, though, Stevens has the speaker give voice to a set of naive assumptions about what he ought to be seeking in the singer's song. His assumptions, moreover, are decidedly Brémondian, inasmuch as they are based in a belief that art reveals rather than constructs the spirit.

The heart of the speaker's logical rhetoric appears in the literal center of the poem, its fourth stanza, where he answers his own question, "Whose spirit is this," with an elaborate bit of deductive analysis (note in the following stanza the "ifs," the "but," and the implied "then" just prior to "it would"):

If it was only the dark voice of the sea
That rose, or even colored by many waves;
If it was only the outer voice of sky
And cloud, of the sunken coral water-walled,
However clear, it would have been deep air,
The heaving speech of air, a summer sound
Repeated in summer without end
And sound alone. But it was more than that,
More even than her voice, and ours, among
The meaningless plungings of water and the wind,
Theatrical distances, bronze shadows heaped

On high horizons, mountainous atmospheres
Of sky and sea. (105)

This is the stanza Vendler has in mind when she argues that Stevens uses “logical form” without actually being a logician, and one can see her point, particularly in the way that “it” becomes untethered from the subject it refers to (“the spirit”) as this lengthy stanza unwinds itself. “It” grows more rather than less mystified because the poem’s mixture of logic and lyric causes the speaker to run his pronoun through so much verbiage that “it” becomes hard to track. Note, for instance, how the rhetorical structure of “if-then-but” requires a dutiful examination of sequential clauses, while simultaneously the aesthetic requirements of lyric poetry demand a flourishing of figures (“sunken coral water-walled”; “The heaving speech of air”) that tend to obfuscate rather than clarify. With a couple of careful readings, it is easy enough to paraphrase what the stanza means: “if the spirit of the song were just nature, then it would have been merely noise, but it was more than that.” However, anyone who reads the above stanza will see that this paraphrase gives no sense of the befuddling pleasure that comes from wading through the speaker’s lines. Indeed, the speaker’s tendency to let his lyricism run away from his logic is most clear at the end of the stanza, where, after dismissing nature as “sound alone” and not the source of the spirit he is seeking, he promptly launches into a hyperbolic, almost mock-Shelleyan four-line account of “The meaningless plungings of water” that moves through “Theatrical distances,” “high horizons,” and “mountainous atmospheres.” In short, on the level of argument or content, the speaker is trying to stand apart from the singer’s song and analyze it carefully as a pure poetry that exists without debt or reference to nature. On the sonic and metaphorical registers, however, as the speaker hears the song, he recklessly gives voice to an undifferentiated aesthetic experience that encompasses both art and nature.

Indeed, the representation of various surrenders to aesthetic experience becomes the dominant topic of the poem as the singer takes center stage in the final stanzas. As he turns to describe the singer, the speaker leaves behind the clanging language of “mountainous atmospheres” from the previous stanza and instead declares, “It was her voice that made / The sky acutest at its vanishing. / She measured to the hour its solitude. / She was the single artificer of the world / In which she sang” (106). There is a calm beauty in these lines that is different from either the dodgy tonal complexities of the early stanzas or the operatic exclamations of the poem’s conclusion. The singer, described here as “the maker,” exudes to the speaker a confident certitude that “when she sang, the sea, / Whatever self it had, became the self / That was her song” (106). Many critics have read the singer as Stevens’ double in the poem (Baeten 31; Gelpi 159), but as I have shown with “Autumn Refrain” and “The Reader,” Stevens is never comfortable with the pure poetic solipsism that the singer embod-

ies, as she “Knew that there never was a world for her / Except the one she sang and, singing, made” (106). The speaker in his logical obtuseness and the singer in her confident self-sufficiency embody possible forms of aesthetic imagination. Stevens revolves and examines these possibilities in the poem, but he finally stands apart from both of them.

Only twelve lines from the end of the poem, the speaker’s companion is finally given a name:

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

The poem contains two questions: “Whose spirit is this,” which receives the previously discussed answer that takes up almost a third of the poem, and this question posed to Ramon, which is never answered. Instead, the question hangs in the air as the speaker tries to puzzle through why the world around him seems so changed. His earlier claim that the singer’s song created a hermetically sealed world sufficient unto itself is not able to account for the fact that the objective world appears different after he has heard her song.⁹ The world is enchanted, which is perhaps made most clear in the remarkable leap between two lines as the speaker moves from “The lights in the fishing boat at anchor there” to “As the night descended, tilting in the air.” These lines are joined aurally by their rhyme and visually by the similarity between the boat lights and the stars, yet we jump here from the mundane, a fishing boat at anchor, all the way up to the music of the spheres evoked beautifully in the idea that night is “tilting” in the sky as it falls upon the world. Yet, the fishing boats are not dwarfed by the spheres, for it is indeed the lights of the boats that “Mastered the night and portioned out the sea, / Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles.” The interaction between an everyday human creation and nature in its highest “emblazoned” constellations creates a feeling that the world has been synthesized and “arranged” in a new way. Perhaps, then, the question to Ramon is not answered because the question as the speaker phrases it contains its own answer. Significantly, this answer suggests a very different understanding of the relationship of art to nature than does the speaker’s earlier argument that the two should be understood as sealed off from one another.

The poem ends with its famous five-line exclamation that, as J. Hillis Miller notes, does not even hold together grammatically as a sentence (206):

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,
The maker's rage to order words of the sea,
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly starred,
And of ourselves and of our origins,
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds. (106)

I admit that I have gone the long way around in order to bring this reading back to a discussion of pure poetry, but these lines demonstrate why Brémond's theory of pure poetry, even in a secularized form, would never be satisfactory for Stevens. Brémond, of course, demanded that experiences of poetic creation and reception be spiritual, internal, and utterly purified of the world. Here, though, everything that had been held apart in the speaker's earlier argument—sea and she, "sounds" and "words," subjects and objects—clangs impurely together. The lines recall Stevens' argument in "The Irrational Element in Poetry" that the poet must be attentive to reality, but here we see that, for Stevens, the poet should attend to reality not from a sense of social obligation, but because the most resonant, remarkable, and re-ordering aesthetic experiences are made possible by dealing simultaneously in the real ("the sea"), the subjective ("ourselves"), and the ineffable ("fragrant portals, dimly starred").

Thomas Bertonneau argues that the power of the singer's song is that "it produces the kind of attention that latterly can find significance in such an event" (56). The final stanza is the speaker's last attempt at this kind of after-the-fact search for the significance of an earlier aesthetic emotion, and as he reflects, his words are simultaneously too analytic to be pure-poetic, but too emotionally wrought to be entirely analytic. The speaker's exclamatory revelation, which unlike his earlier stanzas does not allow in any way for paraphrasing, describes an aesthetic experience that is not unlike the "evanescent mysticism" of Brémond's pure poetry, but which trades in silence and solipsism for shared "keener sounds" and a world newly demarcated. Poetry, either raised or reduced to its purest essence, is Stevens' object of study throughout *Ideas of Order*, but it is this very act of studying that renders the poems necessarily and wonderfully impure.

University of Central Missouri

Notes

¹Wallace Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 997. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with page number only in parentheses.

²D. J. Mossop's *Pure Poetry*, which is probably the best overall history of the competing theories of pure poetry, presents the following general definition of the term: "it denotes samples of poetry which are or *appear* to be unusually free from non-artistic values and the sort of artistic value which poetry can share with prose" (21). Robert Penn Warren notes that the one factor all theories of pure poetry share in common is hostility to the inclusion of "ideas" in poetry (247).

³ See also Joseph Carroll, who argues, "The lingering note of hedonistic aestheticism in his definition of [pure poetry] harks back to the outlook of his earliest work. At the same time, the definition contains suggestions of a religious purpose for poetry, and though these suggestions are as yet tentative and ambiguous, they point the way ahead" (14).

⁴ Keats, according to Moore, was "a pussy cat on a sunny lawn" (25), while Tennyson "was beguiled and yielded himself to moralities and mumbled them 'til he was eighty" (32). Both examples are fairly representative of Moore's tone.

⁵ For a lengthier consideration of the argument that pure poetry involves "two apparently conflicting preoccupations"—one objective and concerned with technique; the other subjective and concerned with inspiration—see Decker (93–98).

⁶ By far the most thorough account of this particular chapter in the debate on pure poetry can be found in Henry Decker's *Pure Poetry: 1925–1930*.

⁷ Milton J. Bates similarly argues that Stevens uses Brémond's religious ideas as a "stalking horse" for his own secular ideas. See especially 130–32.

⁸ By my count, thirteen of thirty-six poems in the book fit this description (slightly more than one third), although, since this number is based on my assessment of what poems by Stevens are "about," others might arrive at a different number.

⁹ The opposed reading to this, expressed by Robert Friend, among others, is that "it is the singer, also called the maker, who imposes order on reality. For singing as she walks by the inhuman sea, she makes meaning out of its 'meaningless plungings of water and wind,' an ordering that extends mysteriously when the poet and his companion, who have been listening to the song reach the harbor of the town" (629). I am less convinced that she orders reality in her song so much as that she creates an order next to reality. In the stanza under discussion here (the Ramon Fernandez stanza), when the sky suddenly seems arranged and deepened, the speaker and Ramon no longer hear the singer's song, but rather remember it. The momentary feeling of order occurs not during the song, but after it, when their memory of it meshes with images of the outside world, suggesting that the aesthetic experience Stevens wants to evoke is not purely aesthetic but synthetic.

Works Cited

- Baeten, Brooke. " 'Whose Spirit is This?': Musings on the Woman Singer in 'The Idea of Order at Key West.' " *Wallace Stevens Journal* 24.1 (Spring 2000): 24–36.
- Bates, Milton J. *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1985.
- Bertonneau, Thomas F. "What Figure Costs: Stevens' 'The Idea of Order at Key West' (An Anthropoetics)." *Wallace Stevens Journal* 19.1 (Spring 1995): 51–70.
- Bloom, Harold. *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1977.
- Brémond, Henri. Preface. *Entretiens avec Paul Valéry précédés d'une préface de Henri Brémond*. By Frédéric Lefèvre. Paris: Flammarion, 1926.
- . *Prayer & Poetry: A Contribution to Poetical Theory*. Trans. Algar Thorold. London: Burns, Oates, & Washbourne Ltd., 1927.
- Burnshaw, Stanley. "Stevens' 'Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue.'" *The Collected Poems and Selected Prose*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2002. 348–57.
- Carroll, Joseph. *Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1987.
- Cowley, Malcolm. *Exile's Return*. New York: Viking P, 1934.
- Croce, Benedetto. "The Defence of Poetry." *The Great Critics*. Ed. James Harry Smith and Edd Winfield Parks. New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1951.

- Decker, Henry W. *Pure Poetry 1925–1930: Theory and Debate in France*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1962.
- Eastman, Max. *The Literary Mind: Its Place in an Age of Science*. New York: Octagon Books, 1969.
- Filreis, Alan. *Modernism from Right to Left*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.
- Friend, Robert. "Poverty and Plenitude: The Struggle for Belief in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens." *Neophilologus* 73 (1989): 620–32.
- Gelpi, Albert. "Wallace Stevens and Elizabeth Bishop at Key West: Ideas of Order." *Wallace Stevens Journal* 19.2 (Fall 1995): 155–65.
- Halliday, Mark. *Stevens and the Interpersonal*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991.
- Litz, A. Walton. "Wallace Stevens' Defense of Poetry: *La poésie pure*, the New Romantic, and the Pressure of Reality." *Romantic and Modern: Revaluations of Literary Tradition*. Ed. George Bornstein. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1977.
- Mallarmé, Stéphane. *Mallarmé: Selected Prose Poems, Essays, & Letters*. Trans. Bradford Cook. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins P, 1956.
- McCullough, Aaron. "'Desiring-Production' in Stevens' 'The Idea of Order at Key West.'" *Wallace Stevens Journal* 26.1 (Spring 2002): 99–110.
- Miller, J. Hillis. "Reading and Periodization: Wallace Stevens' 'The Idea of Order at Key West.'" *The Challenge of Periodization: Old Paradigms and New Perspectives*. Ed. Lawrence Besserman. New York: Garland Publishing, 1996.
- Moore, George. "The Thesis." *Pure Poetry*. Ed. George Moore. London: Nonesuch P, 1924.
- Mossop, D. J. *Pure Poetry: Studies in French Poetic Theory and Practice 1746 to 1945*. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1971.
- Pearce, Roy Harvey. *The Continuity of American Poetry*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1961.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. *Poe: Poetry, Tales, and Selected Essays*. Ed. Patrick F. Quinn and G. R. Thompson. New York: Library of America, 1984.
- Roethke, Theodore. "Ideas of Order." *The New Republic* 87.1128 (July 15, 1936): 305.
- Souday, Paul. "Poe and the Theory of Pure Poetry." *New York Times Book Review* LXXV.24,781 (November 29, 1925): 9.
- Stevens, Wallace. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*. 1966. Ed. Holly Stevens. Berkeley: U of California P, 1996
- . *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson. New York: Library of America, 1997.
- Valéry, Paul. "A Foreword." *The Art of Poetry*. Trans. Denise Folliot. New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1958. Vol. 7. *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*. Ed. Jackson Matthews. 15 vols. 1956–75.
- . "Pure Poetry." *New York Herald-Tribune* LXXXVIII.29,736 (April 15, 1928): Sec. 12, p. 1.
- Vendler, Helen. "The Qualified Assertions of Wallace Stevens." *The Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*. Ed. Roy Harvey Pearce and J. Hillis Miller. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins P, 1965.
- Warren, Robert Penn. "Pure and Impure Poetry." *Kenyon Review* 5 (1943): 228–54.
- Whiting, Anthony. *The Never-Resting Mind: Wallace Stevens' Romantic Irony*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1996.
- Wordsworth, William. *The Prelude: A Parallel Text*. Ed. J. C. Maxwell. New Haven: Yale UP, 1971.

Notes Toward a Deleuzian Reading of *Transport to Summer*

AXEL NESME

IN THE TENTH CANTO of "It Must Give Pleasure," the speaker imagines himself returning with his female companion from a lecture at the Sorbonne, "Pleased that the irrational is rational."¹ The couple leaves Paris's most renowned university—after hearing that the distinction between these two seemingly opposite concepts has been officially annulled—at "twilight," that imprecise juncture between day and night, and, therefore, the most appropriate time to manifest the irrelevance of the rational-irrational dichotomy on which most of Western philosophy has been built. Wallace Stevens' paradox is, of course, indissociable from the context of the immediately preceding canto of "It Must Give Pleasure," with its characterization of the "man-hero" as "he that of repetition is most master" (350). This portrayal of Stevens' ideal poet is an invitation to examine the possible connections between Stevens' poetics of repetition and the philosophy of difference and repetition elaborated by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze—a thinker known to have been particularly allergic to the kind of teaching that was dispensed at the Sorbonne. To those who might wish to uphold the distinction between the rational and its negation, Deleuze answers that "the negative is always derived and represented, never original or present" (*Difference* 207). It is the mere shadow of its counterpart and might as well be equated with it. For the very foundation of thought is an *un-grund*, a bottomless depth from which ideas emerge and which, like the Freudian unconscious, knows nothing of negation.

Approaching the works of Stevens from this specific (anti-)philosophical angle is also warranted by a recent seminal study partially devoted to applying the Deleuzian concept of difference to the Stevensian corpus. In her *Poetry and Repetition*, Krystyna Mazur explores several poems in which repetition in rhyme, semantic variation, and polyphony is the paradoxical driving force behind the renewal of the poet's inspiration, a fact of which Stevens himself seemed partially aware when he wrote, "the constant / Violets, doves, girls, bees and hyacinths / Are inconstant objects of inconstant cause / In a universe of inconstancy" (337). The first chapter of Mazur's book is a highly sophisticated discussion of philosophies of difference; how-

ever, her work on Stevens himself does not delve into the complexity of Deleuze's conceptual apparatus which, around the two seemingly monolithic notions of difference and repetition, weaves an intricate network of questions with the aim of understanding differentiation as process. On these questions Mazur remains mostly silent, which causes her analysis eventually to drift away from the Deleuzian problematic toward a more conventional view of stereotype as repetition and poetry as difference, i.e., as a simple liberation from ordinary linguistic usage, not a new mapping of an abstract space where conceptual oppositions have lost their validity. Mazur thus sees "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" culminating in a hymn to the self-renewing power of poetic language and its avoidance of "mechanical repetitions" (100). Even though she offers a brilliant commentary on how the spiraling effect of Stevens' tercets generates difference within repetition, she overlooks the specifically Nietzschean undertones of canto IX of "It Must Give Pleasure," which, by describing "the way a leaf / Above the table spins its constant spin" (350), defines the creative force that is central to Deleuze's post-Nietzschean concept of eternal return:

The eternal return is a force of affirmation, but it affirms everything of the multiple, everything of the different, everything of chance *except* what subordinates them to the One, to the Same, to necessity, everything *except* the One, the Same and the Necessary. . . . Repetition in the eternal return excludes two determinations: the Same or the identity of a subordinating concept, and the negative of the condition which would relate the repeated to the same, and thereby ensure the subordination. (*Difference* 115)

I do not aim in this paper to challenge Mazur's insistence on repetition as process, nor do I take issue with her central Deleuzian thesis that "in Stevens's later poems . . . repetition rarely signifies doubling but, rather, initiates an infinite motion forward, with no end and no beginning" (xix). Instead, by offering a close analysis of several short poems from *Transport to Summer*, to which Mazur, in particular, does not allude in her own study, I hope to show how Deleuze's revision of the Nietzschean theory of eternal return is inseparable from key notions that Mazur herself does not exploit, such as the pure past, intensity, the "dark precursor" (*Difference* 119 ff.), esoteric words, sense as distinct from signification, and the Idea as multiplicity. These are some of the leitmotifs found in Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*² as well as in several poems from *Transport to Summer*, leitmotifs that unfold like prismatic reflections of concepts that can be apprehended only in their various diffractions—or in what Wallace Stevens himself might have called their "more than rational distortion" (351).

Among Stevens' many musings on the complicity of the rational with the irrational is the poem entitled "Pieces," voiced as an invitation to the

wind of inspiration to "Come home" (306). In this possible parody of Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," the English romantic poet's elemental projection of his sublime self is made to appear in the somewhat less dignified guise of a "dog that runs away" (307), as tameless and uncontrollable as Shelley's "Spirit fierce," though troped in much humbler terms. The poem's initial tercet is made up of three end-stopped lines, the meaning of the second one hinging on the way the reader chooses to interpret the other two. "There are things in a man besides his reason" may either be a reflection of the character's loss of temper in line 3 ("Come home, wind, he kept crying and crying"), or a metaphorical gloss of line 1 exhibiting the workings of the poetic imagination, equally capable of seeing "Tinsel in February" and "tinsel in August." The line situated in the middle of the tercet, therefore, serves as an intermediary between two otherwise semantically unrelated units, a fact worth bearing in mind concerning a poem that highlights various ties and forms of kinship.

The following four stanzas unravel the metaphorical potential of the signifier "tinsel," which alternately designates snow glittering in February air and the changing colors of light in August. In both instances the prismatic, metamorphic aspects of light are foregrounded. Playing on the Emersonian/emanationist notion that "Unity, that Over-soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other" (Emerson 385–86), Stevens depicts the accumulation of snow in the clouds as an "over-crystal" issuing forth "creations of itself." He then moves on to a proto-Hopkinsian evocation of the August sun as Heraclitean fire in a perpetual state of becoming, alternately "more blue than red," then "more red / Than green" (307).

In the same way as it shifts from the Emersonian to the pre-Socratic paradigm, the poem interlocks present and past tense, visions of moving light and apostrophes to the wind, thus constantly raising the question of what ties the "pieces" of the title together, a question made even more urgent by the last two stanzas, where the wind is troped by three successive comparisons, then by a somewhat enigmatic personification:

The wind is like a dog that runs away.
But it is like a horse. It is like motion

That lives in space. It is a person at night,
A member of the family, a tie,
An ethereal cousin, another milleman. (307)

An apt illustration of what Stevens later called "intricate evasions of as" (415), the analogies attempt to capture something that escapes definition, at the same time underscoring its elusiveness. As flowers of rhetoric, they diffract their signified in much the same way as the ornamental glass called "millefiori"—literally, a thousand flowers—plays with all the colors

of the spectrum. Trying to establish kinship with the wind of inspiration, Stevens defines it as “a tie, / An ethereal cousin.” The wind itself cannot be confined within one meaning, although its motion, like metaphorical “transport” (to summer), is what connects the pieces into a whole; it refuses to “Come home” inside the limits of the poem. Although related both to the speaker and to its fellow element, “all-related fire,” it is nothing *but* a relation, “a sense in sounds beyond their meaning,” which itself resists being pinned down to one meaning, precisely because it partakes of the dimension of sense: it is nothing but the enigmatic “milleman” that brings the poem to a close. As a proper name reduced to a common noun by the disappearance of its initial capital, “milleman” means nothing in and of itself. It only invites the reader to verify the pertinence of Stevens’ earlier aphorism on the sense beyond the meaning of sounds. As an echo of “millefiori” in the second tercet, “milleman” is indeed a “tie” connecting one piece of the poem to the next; it functions as a go-between or, as Stevens paronomastically suggests, as a *middleman*, much as the “motion” that defines metaphorical transport is the unnameable sense beyond the meaning of vehicle and tenor that, although linking one to the other, will not be contained within one unifying signification. Combining the one (“man”) and the many (“mille”), the singular (Stevens’ neologism “milleman”) and the ordinary (the proper name “Milleman” stripped of its initial capital), the word isolates poetic sense as the other of meaning, the sense that Deleuze paradoxically finds at the heart of nonsense, esoteric words, and verbal coinages:

In effect, we can never formulate simultaneously both a proposition and its sense; we can never say what is the sense of what we say. From this point of view, sense is the veritable *loquendum*, that which in its empirical operation cannot be said. . . . There is only one kind of word which expresses both itself and its sense—precisely the nonsense word. . . . [T]he nonsenses so frequent in the empirical operation are like the secret of sense for the conscientious observer, all of whose faculties point towards a transcendent limit. (*Difference* 155)

According to Deleuze, esoteric words connect heterogeneous “series.” This is precisely the case in Stevens’ poem, where the thematic series “metaphors of light” and “the wind of inspiration connecting fragments of reality” converge in “milleman” as the instrument of what the philosopher calls “transitions from one series to another, . . . the communication between series, . . . generally secured through a proposition which begins in one series and ends in another, or through onomatopoeia, that is, a sound which partakes of both” (*Logic of Sense* 43).

The theme of the wind as metaphorical motion recurs in “Continual Conversation with a Silent Man,” and it comes as no surprise that here

too the main issue turns out to be the link between “The old brown hen and the old blue sky” and “The broken cartwheel” (312) that provide the sparse setting of a conversation that barely qualifies as such, since the speaker’s enigmatic interlocutor is given no voice of his own. The metaphorical link, explicitly designated as such in “Thinking of a Relation Between the Images of Metaphors” that I will study below, here once again evades definition. In an echo to “Man Carrying Things” and “Pieces,” the conversation revolves around the way in which “many meanings in the leaves” are “Brought down to one below the eaves” (312), reflecting how metaphorical multiplicity is ordered home and the motion of trope brought to a standstill. In the penultimate tercet, however, the “silent man” of the title suddenly acquires oddly inhuman characteristics and becomes the embodiment of the radically Other. Defined as “the sound / Of things and their motion: the other man” (313), he is clearly reminiscent of the “milleman” at the end of “Pieces,” and also brings to mind the dissociation of sense and meaning in the same poem. Deleuze similarly describes the *silence* of sense—which is perceived when words are reduced to mere combinations of sounds—as what lies beyond meaning in terms of a “forced movement which sweeps aside and overruns the series” (*Difference* 121–22), precisely, as we have seen, because the only word capable of uttering its own sense is the esoteric or invented word which silences all other meanings. The poem’s first stanza situates our life in a liminal space: “The old brown hen and the old blue sky, / Between the two we live and die—.” The metaphorical imagination is what ties hen and sky into “The chain of the turquoise hen and sky” (312). The silent motion is what brings heterogeneous series into contact according to both Stevens and Deleuze. In *The Necessary Angel*, Stevens sees the imagination’s main attribute as its nobility, i.e., something that “must not be fixed . . . [and] resolves itself into an enormous number of vibrations, movements, changes” (664). The Deleuzian equivalent of the Stevensian imagination is “the in-itself of difference [which] hides itself by giving rise to that which covers it” (*Difference* 117), and it seems quite fitting that, although Stevens portrays the “other man” as a “turquoise monster moving around,” Deleuze too places *monstrosity* alongside poetry as two instances of what he calls “differential object[s]” or “transcendent exercise[s]” of those faculties whereby Ideas as “pure multiplicities” are actualized (*Difference* 193–94).

In its effort to come to terms with that motion that according to Deleuze connects heterogeneous series, “Thinking of a Relation Between the Images of Metaphors” may be seen as a companion piece to “Continual Conversation with a Silent Man.” Written in unrhymed couplets, “Thinking of a Relation . . .” seems to mirror in its form the confrontation between the subject and the world. Initially the fisherman in the second couplet seems one with his own perceptions, in a state of quasi-animal receptiveness on which only the enjambment seems to cast a slight element of doubt: he is “all / One ear” (310). As for the dove reflected in the fisherman’s eye, it

resembles only itself. There is at this point no “relation” among the bird, the fisherman, and the bass he is presumably hoping to catch. All three exist as discrete entities, impermeable to one another: “There is one dove, one bass, one fisherman” (310). This oneness, however, turns out to be a semblance. As “coo becomes rou-coo, rou-coo,” a spacing splits the sound that differs from itself as it repeats itself. The theme as such nonetheless remains “unstated,” leaving us with the conundrum of variations without a theme. Although the “relation between the images of metaphors” is thinkable, no *ur*-metaphor underlies it: since it remains unstated, the theme does not strike perfectly and remains a hypothesis (“it might strike”). There might be revelation, “disclosure,” but the exact content of the disclosure is not worded, and the poem concludes with a series of conditionals. The dove *being* itself while at the same time *replicating* itself in the gazer’s eye remains a virtuality. The thing conceived and the thing perceived cannot coincide:

How close

To the unstated theme each variation comes . . .
 In that one ear it might strike perfectly:

State the disclosure. In that one eye the dove
 Might spring to sight and yet remain a dove.

The fisherman might be the single man
 In whose breast, the dove, alighting, would grow still.
 (310)

Although in “Man Carrying Thing” Stevens allows for the possibility of an epiphanic moment when “The bright obvious stands motionless in cold” (306), in “Thinking of a Relation . . .” we do not actually witness the dove “alighting” and growing “still” in the fisherman’s—i.e., the poet’s as well as the reader’s—breast. As the dove resists capture, so the relation between the scattered images of metaphor(s) eludes designation. The dove growing still in the fisherman’s breast thus does not only trope metaphor itself. It also metaphorizes the very act of isolating the theme beneath the variations, the dove *per se* as opposed to the multiplicity of individual doves (hence the shift from the plural “wood-doves” to the singular “dove” in the poem’s first and last lines). It is a metaphor of metaphor and of its impossible grounding in an arch-signifier, which must remain a *would-dove* or, as we will see below, what Deleuze calls a “dark precursor.” In “Thinking of a Relation . . .” Stevens elaborates both on the *relation* between images, which is passed over in silence, and the *theme* underlying the variations, which remains unspoken. Thus both theme and

relation enter into a metaphorical ratio, but the sense that connects them obstinately thwarts our efforts to give it a name.

Among the aspects of Krystyna Mazur's Deleuzian account of Stevens' poetry that call for further elucidation is her understanding of the central notion of *dramatization* that the critic applies, in particular, to Stevens' metaphor of the poem as an act of the mind in "Of Modern Poetry." In Mazur's view, Stevens uses theater as a means to represent movement and change, in other words, the variable contexts that may have a bearing on the reception of a poem. Although such lines as "It has to . . . speak words that in the ear . . . repeat, / Exactly , that which it wants to hear" (219) support Mazur's idea that "growing out of accidental encounters, the poem is both limited and empowered by its own actuality" (94), Mazur somewhat limits movement to the mutable fates that befall poems as they encounter new readers and those readers' desires. In his introduction to *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze states that repetition is the essence of movement, so that dramatization, instead of designating the variable trajectory between the poetic message and its addressee, is the very modality by which the Idea, a virtuality, becomes actual in the same way as "[t]he shortest is . . . the dramatisation of the Idea of a line" (*Difference* 218). The movement to which Stevens alludes in "Of Modern Poetry," therefore, is not reducible to the process of transference whereby, as Auden famously proclaimed, "The words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living" (742). This movement defines modern *poiesis* itself as a dramatization or, as Deleuze also puts it, a differentiation of ideas: "the poem of the act of the mind" is the poem of the mind as drama where each thought is an act in the play of repetition, and what defines the modernity of the poet/actor/metaphysician in the dark is that

every Idea turns us into larvae, having put aside the identity of the I along with the resemblance of the self. . . . [F]or we are never fixed at a moment or in a given state but always fixed by an Idea as though in the glimmer of a look, always fixed in a movement that is under way. (*Difference* 219)

The Deleuzian notion of dramatization directly impacts our understanding of Stevensian lyrical subjectivity. In a recent article Helen Vendler points out Stevens' preference for third person utterance, which allows his speaker to maintain analytical distance from himself. Vendler shows how this demultiplying of lyrical subjectivity is a means for Stevens to "work toward an objective view of his emotions and convictions" and preserve a degree of reticence in order to shield "his griefs from too devastating a self-exposure" (134). But, viewed from a Deleuzian perspective, the poet's use of the third person—called the "non-person" by the linguist Emile Benveniste (251–57)—might also be thought to allow him to maintain lyrical utterance in a non-subjective limbo, in an embryonic state reminiscent

of Deleuze's notion of the "larvae"-like condition that presides over the genesis of true ideas. Vendler's hypothesis is, "Each of these personae embodies some aspect of Stevens himself or the world as he perceives and conceives it" (137). The underlying assumption thus remains one of a unitary subject in the same intimate relationship to his masks as Aristotelian substance to its attributes. Adopting this logic results in being forced to choose between "singularities already comprised in individuals and persons, or the undifferentiated abyss" (*Logic of Sense* 103), which ultimately leads the critic to opt for the former in order to preserve what is perhaps no more than the fiction of a unified poetic self. Instead, the proliferation of personae that we witness throughout Stevens' oeuvre may be read as opening up a Dionysian world teeming with "impersonal and pre-individual . . . nomadic singularities which are no longer imprisoned within the fixed individuality of the infinite Being (the notorious immutability of God) nor inside the sedentary boundaries of the finite subject" (*Logic of Sense* 107), and thus pointing toward what Deleuze called "the field of the transcendental" (*Logic of Sense* 103), where simulacra, instead of being pale imitations of an original model, embody the workings of difference (*Difference* 69). Simulacra are thus an integral part of the dynamics of eternal return in which nothing new is created unless it is repeated "in the present of metamorphosis" (*Difference* 90)—i.e., the specific time frame in which the poet's personae are generated from an absent center—a dynamic that secures the autonomy of the work and simultaneously heralds the death of its author as the unifying agency behind all its masks:

Eternal return . . . constitutes the autonomy of the product, the independence of the work. . . [I]t is the secret coherence which establishes itself only by excluding my own coherence, my own identity, the identity of the self, the world and God. (*Difference* 90–91)

Deleuze presents the interrelated concepts of dramatization and actualization as the process whereby the Idea is materialized in speech, be it philosophical or poetic. These concepts seem particularly enlightening in a discussion of the theme/analysis dialectic that shapes Stevens' comical and perplexing "Analysis of a Theme," a text that revisits the motif of monstrosity in the playful manner announced by its narrative premise: "How happy I was the day I told the young Blandina of three-legged giraffes . . ." (304). The "analysis" that follows is begotten on a double impossibility. The first one is the impossibility of equating the "I" that utters the theme with Wallace Stevens himself, whose great-great-great-grandmother was named Blandina—a fact that would obviously have made it difficult for the author to tell "young Blandina" any story at all. To this temporal aporia Stevens adds the oddity of "three-legged giraffes" only to be found in imaginary zoos, and this, of course, is the whole point. The analysis itself

sets up a double dichotomy of “conscious world” versus “subconscious time” that has no place of its own, i.e., cannot be visualized in spatial terms, and is a locus of pure “abstract motion.” It might be tempting to view this province as the birthplace of the theme’s “three-legged giraffes,” but the speaker explicitly dismisses this hypothesis by describing its inhabitants as “Pure coruscations, that lie beyond / The imagination.” The creatures that dwell in this temporal medium mostly lend themselves to negative definition. They are “immaterial,” “Invisible,” “unattained,” and nameless; and, contrary to “three-legged giraffes,” “speaking worms” and “birds / Of mutable plume” (304), they are not obtained by subtraction (of a leg), combination (of human and animal features) or modification (of the spectrum). Unlike figments of the Coleridgean fancy, which “has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites . . . [and is] no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space” (Coleridge 305), the creatures of “subconscious time” only allow “Indyterranean / Resemblances.” In other words, being “time’s haggard mongrels,” they resemble nothing that can be made visible by rearranging fragments of reality into chimera-like fictions. Instead, as the quasi-oxymoron “Indyterranean / Resemblances” suggests, their only likeness is to be found in unlikeness itself, i.e., in pure verbal creation, for example the portmanteau adjective “Indyterranean” combining the obsolete noun “Indy” once used to designate India, and the second half of the noun “Medi-terranean.” “[T]ime’s haggard mongrels,” I would argue, are those improbable verbal creations that, once *acclimatized* within the space of the poem, cease to be those “immaterial monsters [that] move, / Without physical pedantry / Or any name” in order to become the “ithy oonts and long-haired / Plomets” (304–05) that turn into objects of enjoyment by combining the familiar and the strange. “[I]thy oonts” are poetic oddities whose obscurity may be dispelled by resorting to the Greek etymology of “ithy” (meaning *erect*) and the dictionary definition of “oont,” a rare word for *camel*, which is also the title of a poem by Kipling. As for “Plomet,” it is a pure neologism, perhaps derived from a German mispronunciation of the word “plumet,” as the reference to “Herr Gott” suggests.

Two competing versions of time emerge from this poem: the past of “the day I told the young Blandina of three-legged giraffes,” and its representation through memory allowing us to experience it once again as a present when “We enjoy” the sights evoked in the poem’s last tercet. As we have seen, this past is a pure fiction based on a chronological/biographical impossibility. Parallel to this is the realm of “ugly, subconscious time,” haunted by immaterial monsters bearing no resemblance to anything remotely familiar, pure verbal creations devoid of meaning or, as Stevens writes, “Without . . . any name,” because their proper sphere is sense itself as the bottomless foundation to which Deleuze refers when he interprets Plato’s theory of reminiscence as an approximation of his own concept of the “pure past.” The pure past, according to Deleuze, is intrinsi-

cally distinct from the present that once was. Its foundational depths are sounded only through a process similar to Proustian reminiscence which preserves its pastness without assimilating it to a present that no longer is—a process that Stevens translates in his own terms when he writes, “The knowledge of bright-ethered things / Bears us toward time, on its / Perfective wings” (305). Between “subconscious time” and the time toward which we are borne lies the interval of knowledge as reminiscence by which the “*Perfective wings*” of a past that was never present (which is therefore “perfective” in the grammatical sense of the word) return us to its “province,” our own “conscious world” (304; italics added). As time’s “haggard mongrels,” poetic signifiers bridge the gap between both spheres. If, as Deleuze writes, “words are genuine intensities within certain aesthetic systems” (*Difference* 118), Stevens suggests that they alone can reach into “the pure element of the past in general pre-exist[ing] the passing present . . . a substantial temporal element (the Past which was never present) playing the role of ground” (*Difference* 82).

As may be gathered from the previous analysis, Deleuze’s concepts of Idea as multiplicity, pure past, and sense are philosophical metaphors of difference in the act of differing from itself. This process of (self-)differentiation, which Deleuze transcribes as “different/ciation” (*Difference* 246) is the focus of Stevens’ “From the Packet of Anacharsis,” a poem whose main theme appears to be the birth of the artistic idea. The first two tercets are a brief narrative of how the Scythian prince Anacharsis found lines he had written near Athens describing a white farm in terms unrelated to its original whiteness: “The farm was fat and the land in which it lay / Seemed in the morning like a holiday’” (317). The true light that shone on the farm, the speaker seems to indicate, came from Anacharsis’ own way of looking at it. The poet goes on to speculate as to how Puvis de Chavannes would render the same scene “in his gray-rose with violet rocks,” then imagines the critical reaction of a man named Bloom, who would “protest / And speak of the floridest reality . . .” The difficulty here lies partially in identifying the speaker’s own stance vis-à-vis the French symbolist painter Puvis de Chavannes, some of whose works were admired by Georges Seurat, Paul Gauguin, Maurice Denis, and Pablo Picasso, and who was known for the restraint he showed in his use of color. “[T]he floridest reality,” therefore, is a derogatory judgment with which Stevens himself might disagree. What seems to interest the poet most here is how the original whiteness of the form engenders different versions of itself in successive viewers, a theme already tackled in “Holiday in Reality,” which begins by stating: “It was something to see that their white was different, / Sharp as white paint in the January sun” (275); and in “Description Without Place,” which explicitly focuses on “The difference that we make in what we see / And our memorials of that difference” (300). In “From the Packet of Anacharsis” the poet’s gaze follows the genesis

of colors as they irradiate from “the punctual centre of all circles [where] white / Stands truly” (317).

As an illustration of Stevens’ awareness of the agency of difference as repetition prefiguring the definition of the man-hero as “he that of repetition is most master” (350) already mentioned in my introduction, this poem is less challenging in the general statement it makes than in its actual wording, especially in its use of the verb “impinge” in the lines:

The circles nearest to it share

Its color, but less as they recede, impinged
By difference and then by definition
As a tone defines itself and separates. . . . (317)

The verb “impinge” in its various senses describes here how difference both *encroaches upon* and *impacts* the circles as each acquires its individual tone and color. The Latin etymology of the verb tells us as much, since it is derived from a verb combining the prefix *im-* and the radical *pan-gere*, whose *a* becomes an *i* as it is attached to its prefix. In the history of the English verb *to impinge*, there is thus a brief moment when its radical, though etymologically distinct, is identical to the verb *pingere*, meaning *to paint*. I would, therefore, hypothesize that Stevens was aware of this false etymon, and chose the verb precisely because it allowed the reader, although in filigree, to catch difference operating within the seeming identity of actually dissimilar verbal roots. In this process, it is the difference from itself of the (verbal) root that is manifested to us, and therefore also that of all origins, as if difference flowed back on the point of origin that Stevens calls “the punctual centre of all circles,” and caused it to vacillate in its own identity to itself. We might add that the verb’s mock-etymology proves efficient in the exact proportion that it is a linguistic simulacrum, since it brings together the two interdependent semantic series around which the poem is structured, namely both the act of *painting* and its *impact* on the beholder.

In his *Logic of Sense*, Deleuze explores further the distinction already discussed at great length in *Difference and Repetition* between nonsense and the absence of sense. Contrary to the absence of sense, nonsense, he argues, produces sense “in excess” (*Logic of Sense* 71), as exemplified by Lewis Carroll’s verbal creations in “Jabberwocky.” Esoteric and portmanteau words, Deleuze explains, exhibit how difference is generated by gathering within itself disparate elements, or what I have already referred to as “series.” Difference itself is subject to different/ciation through the agency of those meaningless words (*Difference* 117) that, by creating effects of resonance between heterogeneous series, bring about a specific type of *events* (*Difference* 118), among which Deleuze ranks the genesis of philosophical thoughts as well as the birth of new “literary systems” (*Difference*

121). In order to describe such events Deleuze draws an analogy from the realm of natural phenomena. When lightning strikes, different intensities communicate, but in order for this communication to take place, an invisible "dark precursor" determines in advance the path that lightning will follow. All systems have dark precursors of their own that guarantee the circulation of difference between poles of intensity, but which, in and of themselves, have "no place other than that from which [they are] 'missing' " (*Difference* 120). Dark precursors have no identity of their own, being only "the differenciator[s] of distinct signifieds" (*Difference* 121). Linguistic dark precursors, in particular (including esoteric and portmanteau words), are not identifiable through their meaning, but in that they "induce a maximum of resemblance and identity into the system as a whole" (*Difference* 121).

A spectacular example of the workings of the Deleuzian dark precursor, which we saw briefly at work in Stevens' etymological word-play as well as in the theory of metaphor underlying some of the poems mentioned previously, is to be found in "The Dove in the Belly," a poem to which Harold Bloom briefly alluded in terms that have little to do with what I hope to demonstrate. "*The Dove in the Belly*," Bloom writes, "charmingly deprecates the erotic drive by gently mocking the whole of appearance as a toy. In a world of play, repressed sexuality or the 'deep dove' can be asked to 'placate you in your hiddenness' " (364). In her *Reader's Guide to Wallace Stevens*, Eleanor Cook concurs slightly by identifying the dove with "an internal psychic and physical force" and pointing out that in Stevens' "later poems . . . its erotic associations are to the fore" (206). It must be acknowledged, however, that apart from the word "belly," which may carry a number of associations, erotic or otherwise, very little textual evidence seems to support Bloom's reading of the poem as an allegory of repressed sexuality. Closer, I think, to the poem's dialectic of appearance and inwardness is John N. Serio's suggestion that "any splendor or value in the outer world depends on a response from the inner world, from an imagination imbued with feeling—from 'the dove in the belly' " (5). If the Stevensian intertext is to shed any light on this poem, I would argue that "Thinking of a Relation Between the Images of Metaphors" may have a direct bearing on our reading of "The Dove in the Belly" as troping on the poetic imagination, whose "tempestuous" workings are also thematized in "Man Carrying Thing," where a "storm of secondary things" precedes our final access to "The bright obvious" (306).

An interesting angle from which "The Dove in the Belly" may be approached involves focusing on the two foreign words found in the third and in the penultimate line of the poem, namely the Hebrew word "Selah" and the French word "salut!" There are many connections between both terms besides their belonging to foreign idioms: they are disyllabic, built on the same pattern of sounds and letters (s-vowel-l-vowel-silent consonant), and placed in symmetrical positions, one at the beginning of line 3,

the other at the very end of line 15. There is little doubt as to the meaning of the word "salut," signifying "hello," "salute," or "salvation." The word "Selah," on the other hand, is the esoteric word *par excellence*. Cook indicates that it is frequently used in the Psalms and was "probably a musical or liturgical sign . . . now translated as 'up,' a sign to participants to rise" (206). It seems unlikely, however, that in Stevens' day this latter meaning was widely known, especially since the King James version of the Bible transcribed it verbatim without attempting to offer an English equivalent. As a monument to untranslatability, the term thus seems particularly appropriate to address a dove that is defined by its "hiddenness" in the last line of the poem. As a biblical word, "Selah" also conjures up the whole biblical intertext and offers a possible clue to the title of the poem, one that Cook does not point out, perhaps because it seems almost too obvious to be worth mentioning. In the books of the prophets, one famous "dove" does end up in the belly of a whale, namely Jonah, whose name means *dove* in Hebrew. The meaning of Jonah's name is actually famous for having made possible the tropological reading of the prophet as a prefiguration of Jesus, on whom a dove is said to have descended in Matthew 3:16–17, and whose death and resurrection were thought to have been heralded by the story of Jonah spending three days and nights inside the whale before being "vomited out . . . upon the dry *land*" (Jon. 2:10). In this context, the sea being twice referred to as "tempestuous" in Jonah (1:11–13) before the prophet is thrown overboard may find a more than fortuitous echo in the same adjective describing the dove in Stevens' poem. As for the "salut!" that is heard in the poem's last couplet, it may be a distant echo of Jonah's own exclamation, "Salvation *is* of the Lord" (Jon. 2:9).

Within the poem's dialectic of appearance and concealment, these possible biblical references call for a twofold interpretation. If from the story of Jonah in the belly of the whale the common nouns "dove" and "belly" were all that Stevens deemed worth retaining, this may be consistent with the poet's purely secular belief in the redeeming power of the poetic imagination as well as its necessary grounding in the physicality of the body. In Stevens' worldly revision of Christian allegorical reading—itsself presupposing the complete theory of metaphor known as the Four Senses of Scripture—"excellence collecting excellence" has little to do with the manner in which the Old Testament may cast its reflection on the New in a gradual ascent toward revelation. "The dove in the belly," instead, is what Stevens refers to when he writes, "the people in costumes, / Though poor, though raggeder than ruin, have that / Within them right for terraces" (318). If the word "terraces" is associated with notions of height and elevation, it designates an earth-bound human creation without any added nuance of transcendence. The "snow that never falls to earth," likewise, may cover the mountains, but as Stevens' use of the interrogative form suggests, it would be naïve to seek a sign of divine agency in what essentially remains a mere physical fact.

In addition to these issues, the poem also raises the enigma of a “something more,” the seemingly superfluous word “Selah” which, although devoid of specific meaning, is the agency through which the series of biblical intertextuality and metapoetic meditation are made to communicate. Its function is thus identical to that of the Deleuzian dark precursor that “belongs to a kind of metalanguage and can be incarnated only within a word devoid of sense” (*Difference* 123). Much as the word “Selah” recurs in the Psalms at given intervals, the dark precursor according to Deleuze “is the *refrain*[,] [t]his double status of esoteric words, which state their own sense but do so only by representing it and themselves as nonsense . . . sense, nevertheless incarnated in an absurd representation, but on the basis of which dynamisms will be unleashed” (*Difference* 123). Like the “necessary angel” who, being bound by earthly *necessity*, cannot rise above human height, Stevens’ dove is kept within the confines of the body’s gastric intimacy while preserving that element of foreignness to itself for which Deleuze coined the concept of “deterritorialization.” In this respect, what Deleuze writes of language in general seems quite relevant to Stevens’ own poetic idiom:

All languages are so bilingual in themselves, so multilingual, that one can stammer in one’s own language, that is, always push further back the peaks of deterritorialization of assemblages. A language is crossed by vanishing traces which carry away its vocabulary and syntax. (Deleuze and Parnet 139)³

In the above readings of “Thinking of the Relations Between the Images of Metaphors” and “From the Packet of Anacharsis,” we have seen how the notion of origin was challenged by the fact that systems “exclude[] the assignation of an originary and a derived as though these were a first and second occurrence, because the sole origin is difference” (*Difference* 125). The Deleuzian theory of the dark precursor as what connects intensities within a system of differences is an integral part of a philosophy that claims a heavy debt to Nietzschean eternal return, since, for Deleuze, eternal return “does not cause the same and the similar to return, but is itself derived from a world of pure difference” (*Difference* 125). Central to Nietzsche’s conception of eternal return, according to Deleuze, is the premise that posits a bottomless depth where “original Nature resides in its chaos” (*Difference* 242). The purpose of Nietzsche’s own philosophy is thus “to make chaos an object of affirmation” (*Difference* 243), to identify this chaotic depth as a locus where “differences of differences . . . reverberate to infinity” (*Difference* 241), i.e., as a world of pure intensities and differences between those intensities.

Deleuze’s theory of difference *qua* repetition is also, and perhaps primarily, a theory of the first Idea as inseparable from this notion of intensity. Intensity and Idea, Deleuze argues, are “two corresponding figures

of difference," ideas being "problematic or . . . virtual multiplicities" (*Difference* 244), while intensities are determining factors in their actualization or dramatization. Intensities are thus "individuating factors" (*Difference* 246) that, from the unconscious sphere of differential Ideas, generate individual solutions to Ideas-as-problems. In order to clarify these notions, Deleuze resorts to the example of Leibniz's theory of small perceptions (*Difference* 165 and 244–45): the Idea of the sea, he explains, is a system of differential connections between small particles (drops of water) that materialize in the form of the real motions of the waves. The intensive process leading from one to the other is thought itself—including poetic thought, as Stevens intimates in "Man Carrying Thing."

Read in connection with "Pieces," this small poem once again stands in direct contradiction to Stevens' notebook entry that "There is no such thing as a metaphor of a metaphor" (921), since, as Cook has pointed out, it "literalizes . . . metaphor" (199). Quite interestingly if we bear in mind Deleuze's discussion of Leibniz's "small perceptions," the birth of metaphor in Stevens' poem follows the same trajectory that leads from the Idea as a complex of differences to the final thought, identified by Stevens as the moment when "The bright obvious stands motionless in cold." Before this last stage is reached, both the "brune figure in winter evening" and "The thing he carries," presumably the vehicle and tenor of metaphor, remain

parts not quite perceived.

Of the obvious whole, uncertain particles
Of the certain solid, the primary free from doubt,

Things floating like the first hundred flakes of snow
Out of a storm we must endure all night. . . . (306)

Like Leibniz's drops of water triggering so many unconscious small perceptions which are then consolidated into the whole that we call a wave, the elements of metaphor are assimilated to individual "particles," then to flakes of snow that exist as free-floating, discrete differential elements before their motion is brought to a halt. The most significant verb in this poem is clearly "resist." Repeated three times, it draws our attention away from the cessation of movement—the moment when the enigma of metaphor is finally resolved—toward the specifically *intensive* process that is poetic reading and writing, a process in which the success of the poem is a function of the proper level of intensity in the resistance it offers to the intelligence. Indeed, the fact that the word "resistance" also designates a type of electrical device is perfectly consistent with the Deleuzian notion of intensity.

"[I]t is always by means of an intensity that thought comes to us" (*Difference* 144), Deleuze writes. This is precisely what Stevens may have in mind when, in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," he recalls those "times of inherent excellence" when we apprehend the "first idea." Stevens defines those moments as "incalculable balances . . . not balances / That we achieve but balances that happen" (333–34)—balances, as between poles of intensity which Deleuze says grant us glimpses into "thought which is born in thought, the act of thinking which is neither given by innateness nor presupposed by reminiscence but engendered in its genitivity, . . . a thought without image" (*Difference* 167). The greatness and the limit of the Platonic theory of learning as reminiscence, according to Deleuze, are that they opened up the bottomless depths in which thinking originates, yet "remain[ed] incapable of exploring" these depths (*Difference* 166). This "unconscious of pure thought," the "sphere of sense" (*Difference* 155) that Deleuze investigates in his philosophical rewriting of the myth of eternal return, is what Stevens sets out to explore throughout *Transport to Summer* and what he obliquely names when he writes:

the first idea was not to shape the clouds
In imitation. The clouds preceded us.

There was a muddy centre before we breathed.
There was a myth before the myth began. . . . (331)

University of Lyon
France

Notes

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

²Deleuze's interest in American literature is well documented. In *A Thousand Plateaus* and *Critique et clinique*, notably, the philosopher brings the concept of "assemblage"—*agencement*, in French—to bear on short stories by Henry James, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Melville in order to show how individuals and groups are dynamic multiplicities of "lines" in a perpetual state of becoming. This intuition is particularly relevant to fictional prose, since, by raising such questions as "what happened?" or "what could have happened if . . .?" it foregrounds the various cracks and fissures in becoming that might turn a creative line into a destructive one, for instance. Most of the later Deleuze's emphasis (i.e., starting from the time of his collaboration with Felix Guattari) is on assemblages as complexes of individual and collective expression in which the social and the personal are virtually inseparable. Applying this perspective to Stevens, especially in the wake of James Longenbach's *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things*, would require in-depth analysis of the historical and sociological context of Stevens' writing, a task which goes well beyond the scope of this essay. I have chosen, for the time being, to limit myself to what might be the prolegomena of such a study, namely those aspects of Deleuze's early philosophy that seem particularly apt to describe one

stage in the evolution of Stevens' poetic idiom and might later on be generalized to his entire oeuvre.

To the extent that they entail a radical redefinition of lyric subjectivity, the notions of "series," the "dark precursor," "eternal return," and the "larval subject," which will be encountered in the following pages of the article, might be seen as laying the basis of the "collective assemblage of enunciation" explored by Deleuze in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* and other works that depart from the structuralist inspiration of *Difference and Repetition*. In the following pages, I have chosen to focus almost exclusively on *Difference and Repetition* in order to give the reader a chance to test the validity of a small set of Deleuzian concepts corresponding to a foundational stage in the philosopher's career. I hope thereby to achieve greater conceptual accuracy than by attempting to embrace all of Deleuze's oeuvre at the risk of being schematic or reductive. Also, and more important, I believe this is the only way to do justice to a philosophy that privileges the local and the regional and refuses to be treated as a unitary, overarching system.

³My translation. The French text reads as follows: "toute langue est tellement bilingue en elle-même, multilingue en elle-même, qu'on peut bégayer dans sa propre langue, être étranger dans sa propre langue, c'est-à-dire pousser toujours plus loin les pointes de déterritorialisation des agencements. Une langue est traversée de lignes de fuite qui emportent son vocabulaire et sa syntaxe."

Works Cited

- Auden, W. H. "In Memory of W. B. Yeats." *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*. 2d. Ed. Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair. New York: Norton, 1988. 742–43.
- Benvéniste, Emile. *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, 1. Paris: Gallimard, 1966.
- Bloom, Harold. *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1976.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Biographia Literaria*. Ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983.
- Cook, Eleanor. *A Reader's Guide to Wallace Stevens*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Critique et clinique*. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1993.
- . *Difference and Repetition*. Trans. Paul Patton. New York: Columbia UP, 1994.
- . *The Logic of Sense*. Ed. Constantin V. Boundas. Trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale. New York: Columbia UP, 1990.
- . *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Claire Parnet. *Dialogues*. Paris: Flammarion, 1996.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "The Over-Soul." *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*. Ed. Joel Porte. New York: Library of America, 1983. 385–400.
- Longenbach, James. *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things*. New York: Oxford, 1991.
- Mazur, Krystyna. *Poetry and Repetition: Walt Whitman, Wallace Stevens, John Ashbery*. London and New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Serio, John N. Introduction. *The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens*. Ed. John N. Serio. New York: Cambridge UP, 2007. 1–7.
- Stevens, Wallace. *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson. New York: Library of America, 1997.
- Vendler, Helen. "Stevens and the Lyric Speaker." *The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens*. Ed. John N. Serio. New York: Cambridge UP, 2007. 133–48.

Two Parisians *Qui Font Fi des Jolinesses Banales?* Wallace Stevens' Friendship with the Vidal Family

BART EECKHOUT

I depend a great deal on your adjectives.

—Stevens, letter to Paule Vidal, June 3, 1949

*How I understand the Egyptians who adored the sun.
But the sun does not suffice, and a little kind word . . .
kindles just as much. I count on a few words from you,
which will be my little Easter egg, and send you, dear
Mr. Stevens, my gracious smile.¹*

—Paule Vidal, letter to Stevens, March 28, 1953

*A long time you have been making the trip
From Havre to Hartford, Master Soleil,
Bringing the lights of Norway and all that.*

—Wallace Stevens

I

WALLACE STEVENS AFICIONADOS will recognize the witty tercet from the epigraph above as from a poem first published in July 1939: "Of Hartford in a Purple Light." But few readers have probably ever stopped to consider the material reference that hides beneath the playfully imaginative poetic surface. At least, I know of no critical comments on the poem that have reminded us of the more literal transactions that took place between the French coastal city of Le Havre and Hartford, Connecticut, at the time of writing and that may have triggered the poem's opening image. Le Havre was the port from which the paintings ordered by Stevens through the Vidal family were shipped to his office in Hartford. Behind the poem's opening lines, then, one can hear Stevens waiting, somewhat impatiently, for the next installment in the series of pictorial representations of Europe (metonymically conjured up as "the lights of Norway and all that"), which he began to order in the 1930s from Paris, sight unseen. "A long time you have been making the trip / From Havre to Hartford,"² we can hear him sigh not just to the sun but to

the ship that brings him the latest painted image and that he addresses appropriately as “Master” Soleil, an agent credited with the ability to import the lights of Europe as Stevens could ever only see them through the eyes and craft of painters.

Reading the lines in this biographical context of paintings shipped to the poet tallies with the pictorial master trope in “Of Hartford in a Purple Light,” as well as with the fact that the poem is part of Stevens’ volume most obsessed with painting, *Parts of a World*. As we continue to read the poem, we find its principal concern is with translating visual impressions into words, practicing a poetic equivalent of the genre of the landscape, and pitting American against European scenarios in this respect. Witness “The aunts in Pasadena” who “Abhor the plaster of the western horses” (208), those derivative American plaster casts that are but a poor recollection of European original artworks. The references to Le Havre and Norway at the outset of the poem should not mislead us, therefore, about the real, material origin of the painterly observations Master Soleil is bringing to Hartford. As Stevens’ speaker goes on to associate the purple light on Hartford with the “stage-light of the Opera” (capitalized, as in the Parisian Opéra), and as that light is identified explicitly with a culture of effeminate refinement, we may safely assume Stevens’ associations run to Paris much more spontaneously than they do to either Le Havre or Oslo—just as the French paintings Stevens was receiving through his bookseller, Anatole Vidal, around the same time only passed *through* Le Havre on their way from Paris to Hartford.

It is fascinating to find involuntary echoes of the poem’s overture in the unpublished parts of the correspondence between Stevens and Paule Vidal, who succeeded her father as bibliophilic and pictorial liaison. Writing on February 9, 1949, to report on the shipment of two paintings, Mademoiselle Vidal, wholly unaware of Stevens’ decade-old poem, may be found to exclaim, “At last they have departed from Le Havre last Wednesday. I hope they will have a safe trip and also and above all that upon their arrival in Hartford, under the inquisitive eyes of Monsieur Stevens, they will be well received” (WAS 2834). The English–French word combination of Master Soleil is transposed here, chiasmically, into Monsieur Stevens—same initials.

II

Among Stevens’ many international correspondents who brought the world home to him in his armchair in Hartford, the Frenchman Anatole Vidal and his daughter Paule assume a paradoxical place: every Stevens scholar knows how important the Vidals were as the poet’s Parisian connection for well over two decades, yet barely anybody has taken the trouble to look into the precise nature and details of the relationship. No doubt this lack of scholarly attention is explicable. There is, first of all, the principally economic, business nature of Stevens’ dealings with the Vidals,

who served above all as go-betweens for purchasing books, magazines, postcards, paintings, and assorted French tidbits. More important, there is the fact that soon after Stevens' death the Vidals disappeared from view, since Paule not only sold her bookshop in the year of Stevens' death but more than likely died single and childless, which made the extinct French connection particularly hard to handle by the time Stevens scholarship took a historicizing and biographical turn in the 1980s. It is only natural, furthermore, that biographically inclined American scholars have not been tempted to undertake much local research in Paris given the fact that Stevens himself never traveled to the Old Continent. Finally, there is the somewhat cumbersome fact that the Parisian end of the surviving correspondence, although it is available only on U.S. soil, is all in French, which has likely diminished the appeal to American researchers.

As Peter Brazeau explains in a footnote in his oral biography of Stevens, the poet got to know the then 62-year-old Anatole Vidal in 1931, when the latter

bought a Parisian bookstore of which Stevens was already a customer. Stevens had had little rapport with the previous owner, who had not been particularly interested in art or in his foreign clients. . . . Vidal, on the other hand, was indefatigable in satisfying Stevens' wants, from bonbons to books to an occasional painting. Indeed, they established such rapport that an oil painting of Vidal by Jean Labasque hung in Stevens' bedroom, part of the furnishings mentioned in the poem "The Latest Freed Man." The war interrupted Stevens' contact with Vidal; when the poet again became a client of the bookshop after the liberation of Paris, the Librairie Coloniale was run by Vidal's daughter, her father having died in 1944. Paule Vidal, as her father before her, was equally dogged in fulfilling Stevens' requests until just before his death in 1955. (27)

Brazeau's brief synopsis efficiently sums up what most Stevens scholars would be able to repeat. The rest is largely silence: in some of the best biographical and historicizing studies of the poet—Milton Bates's *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self*, James Longenbach's *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things*, and George Lensing's *Wallace Stevens and the Seasons*—the name of Vidal is entirely absent, while in the monumental two-volume biography by Joan Richardson, the shorter biography by Tony Sharpe, Glen MacLeod's study of Stevens' relation to painting, and Alan Filreis' fact-filled *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World*, it receives only a few passing mentions.³

Unfortunately for us, Stevens' half of the correspondence with Anatole Vidal is lost. By contrast, a fair share of his letters to Paule Vidal (which he wrote in English for his part) have been published by Holly Stevens in

her selection of *Letters of Wallace Stevens*.⁴ The other half of the correspondence, by Mademoiselle Vidal, however, and thus the nature of the full exchange, remains uncharted territory. All of the Vidals' letters and Stevens' remaining responses to them survive in the Wallace Stevens Collection at the Huntington Library in California, where I studied them in the summer of 2003. The relatively small correspondence from Vidal *père* comprises twenty-one pieces and covers the period 1935–1940. It is obviously incomplete as the man's dealings with Stevens had started already back in 1931 and in one of his earliest surviving letters he speaks of the "very agreeable" relations they have been entertaining "for six years" (WAS 2654). The much larger correspondence from his daughter, which on the basis of internal evidence looks as if it *is* complete or nearly so, comprises eighty-two pieces in the first decade after the war (1945–1955).

Because of the length, completeness, two-sidedness, and general interest of the latter correspondence, I will be focusing here principally on this second collection. Before doing so, however, let me present some of the bare facts about Anatole Vidal and his bookshop as they may be reconstructed on the basis of the surviving correspondence.⁵ For we do learn a handful of things about the man from his own and his daughter's epistolary explanations. Thus, we get to realize that the family was originally from Brittany, the westernmost part of France (WAS 2814), although the family name is in fact much more common in the south of the country toward the Mediterranean and the Pyrenees (see www.geopatronym.com). We learn, further, that Monsieur Vidal studied at the Sorbonne (he mentions taking classes with Brunetières and Gabriel Séailles [WAS 2655]), that around 1900 he had extended friendly relationships with a number of Germans (WAS 2666), and that at the outbreak of the First World War he found himself living in Brazil, where, as he explained, he was commercially involved with industrialists and served as a correspondent for at least one German bank in both São Paulo and Rio Grande do Sul (WAS 2665–66). We also know that he chose to return from South America to volunteer as a soldier in the Great War and that during the final three months of that war he stood guard over German prisoners of war, an experience that filled him with stereotypical convictions about the power-worshipping German mentality wryly recollected to Stevens at the outset of the Second World War (WAS 2666). How Anatole Vidal had ever come to undertake the big move to Brazil neither he nor his daughter elucidated in any of the preserved letters.

To flesh out a physical image of his French correspondent, Stevens could not only fall back on the painting commissioned from Jean Labasque. In June of 1938, when the painting was finished but not yet shipped, Vidal sent two small photos of himself to Stevens, to which his American customer obliged by sending a picture in return. One of the photographs shows Vidal from the chest up, dated 1930, the other standing at full length, reclining slightly against the doorpost of his shop, dated 1934

(WAS 2658; see figs. 1 and 2). Combined, these images show a smallish man of distinction and standing, wearing glasses and a three-piece suit, unsmiling, with white-gray receding hair and a slight moustache in the earlier picture. As others have noted before, the fanciful French description used by Stevens in the final line of “The Latest Freed Man” to refer to Vidal—“*Qui fait fi des jolinesses banales*” (187) [“Who does not care for banal forms of prettiness”]—is not in the surviving correspondence. The words would seem to be Stevens’ own concoction based on Vidal’s claim, in the same letter containing the photos, that the art of Jean Labasque rejects the merely “joli” (WAS 2658) (see fig. 3, Labasque’s portrait of Vidal).



Fig. 1. Anatole Vidal, 1930. Reproduced by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif.

From Paule Vidal’s first letters after the war, when Stevens resumed contact with the bookstore, we learn about Anatole’s decline during the war years: how, weakened by the stress caused both by the war and slackening business, he suffered a stroke (“une crise assez violente”) in the spring of 1942, which left him almost paralyzed for nearly two years, slowly pining away until he died in September 1944 at the age of 75 (WAS 2806–07). After his medical deterioration in 1942, he was forced to leave the shop to his daughter, who was more than likely his only child, since



Fig. 2. Anatole Vidal, standing in the doorway of his bookstore, 1934. Reproduced by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif.



Fig. 3. Portrait of Anatole Vidal by Jean Labasque (1938), which Stevens owned. Courtesy of Peter Hanchak.

no other siblings are ever mentioned (nor is any wife or, in Paule's case, mother). Before the war, Monsieur Vidal had had two younger associates in the business, but his daughter was now forced to run the shop on her own, although she was apparently helped in making the transition by someone she describes as a highly lettered and artistic friend of her father's (WAS 2806).

To ground this brief biographical essay more materially, I looked up the various addresses at which the Vidals' bookstore was located over the years. The shop was originally called *Librairie Coloniale A. Vidal* and retained that name when Vidal's daughter took over. At first, it was to be found at 62 Rue Vaneau, in Paris' 7th arrondissement. After the war, it had moved to 17 Rue de Tournon, in the neighboring 6th arrondissement, and in the spring of 1948, Paule Vidal announced she was moving the shop again to a new location, which after the summer turned out to be 80 Rue de Grenelle, back in the 7th arrondissement. The name of the shop had been decolonialized by then (if not depatriarchalized) to simply *Librairie A. VIDAL & Cie*. This is where the shop would stay until Paule Vidal sold it to the widow of an industrialist, a Madame H. Bernard, in the spring of

1955, when Stevens was already terminally ill (WAS 2885). During those years, Paule Vidal herself lived in an apartment in the 7th arrondissement at 68 Rue de Babylone, from which she was threatened with eviction in the spring of 1954 (WAS 2882–83), although she seems to have managed to stave off the threat until at least her final surviving letter to Stevens in May 1955 (WAS 2885).

Both the 6th and 7th arrondissements, where all the foregoing addresses are to be found within easy walking distance of each other, are currently among the wealthiest and most eligible in the city. They are on the Left Bank of the Seine and are part of the Faubourg Saint-Germain and Saint-Germain-des-Prés—the area delimited by the Hôtel des Invalides to the west, the Musée d’Orsay to the north, and the Quartier Latin, the intellectual heart of the city, to the east. It is the area on whose eastern edge we also find the Sorbonne and the city’s two most famous literary cafés, Café de Flore and Les Deux Magots. Historically, this is an area full of small bookstores and literary publishers, although several of these have now been ousted by fancy boutiques and luxury stores.

There are a few further things we may grasp from visiting the locations of the shops. The Rue Vaneau, where the shop was before the war, has changed a lot at first sight and offers the classic spectacle of upscaling, although most of the new apartment buildings in the street are still in the tradition of downtown Parisian *immeubles*. At Vidal’s original address, however, we still find a quaint sort of bookstore. The remaining shop instantly tells us something about the incredibly small size of such stores—single-room street-front stores about the size of a kitchen, where an occupation of as little as ten people seems already out of the question. In stores such as these, one steps in to be immediately face to face with the owner and is automatically given a one-on-one personal treatment. In such a world, a letter by a relatively wealthy American customer such as Stevens would be similar to an unusually important person entering the store and perhaps being the single customer to attend to that whole morning or afternoon. In the case of both Vidals’ responses to Stevens, this helps to explain some of their conspicuous devotion to their loyal and financially valuable customer. It also provides context for Paule’s eagerness to receive letters from him, as well as her frequently wistful comments on business in her modest shop being slow and her resulting state of *ennui* or even *cafard*—both of them words she actually uses. Stevens’ friend Barbara Church, on one of her visits, reported back to Stevens by saying she was “sure [Mademoiselle Vidal’s] shop would please you, small, cosy, with few people around” (WAS 3596). From Paule Vidal’s letters, it becomes clear, though, that life in such a small shop could also get to be quite lonesome for an aging, single woman.

We should be careful to factor in the historical context, then, when we pay a visit to the original locations of the Vidals’ bookstores or situate them on a map. The Rue de Tournon, to which the store moved during the



Fig. 4. Location of Vidal's bookstore on Rue de Tournon (first building on left).

war, is on the face of it in a highly desirable area again—just north of the Jardin du Luxembourg, one of the oldest and stateliest parks in the city. During those years, Paule Vidal's store was a mere hundred yards away from the French Senate, to which the sightlines of the street are consciously built up (see fig. 4; the store occupied a space in the building on the left



Fig. 5. Location of Vidal's bookstore on Rue de Grenelle.

that is no longer in use as such). The Rue de Tournon is a short street that, appropriately in the case of Stevens, still contains a small gallery selling paintings as well as three independent small bookstores. Yet the wealthy environment today says nothing, of course, about the commercial success of small retailers in the immediate postwar years. This becomes obvious again when we look at the once-again tiny third location of the store, in the Rue de Grenelle (see fig. 5), a street in which, more famously, James Joyce also lived for

almost six years (at No. 192, a.k.a. 2 Square Robiac, his single most extended address in Paris). In this case, the retail space that Mademoiselle Vidal used from 1948 to 1955 still exists; it now smells fragrantly of the products sold by a local perfume creator.⁶ During the Korean War, Paule Vidal reported how her store was only two minutes away from the Soviet Embassy and how the Russians from the Embassy were her “most amiable and most loyal clients! . . . after you, of course. Here I am, then, sandwiched!” (WAS 2847). Once we realize how small the bookstore was, we are better able to understand how the global confrontation between East and West, between Mademoiselle Vidal’s physical Soviet customers and her virtual American customer, was directly responsible for making sure she had things to eat—whether sandwiches or something more French. A sense of material dependency and economic insecurity is what we should keep in mind also when we hunt down the apartment building in which Paule Vidal lived as a private citizen in the Rue de Babylone (a street that traverses the Rue Vaneau in which the original shop was located). Again, the area and apartments are clearly eligible by today’s standards, but by the end of her own professional career, Paule Vidal was utterly desperate about getting evicted and the impossibility of finding any place for her to live: her only option, she felt, was to buy a small one- or two-room apartment in an old house, but even then she would have had to borrow money, which banks at the time were unwilling to do to a single person such as herself (WAS 2882). In other words, if the aging Stevens could invest in rare books and brand new paintings and purchase these through his Parisian connection, this does not at all mean Paule Vidal was living a similarly comfortable and luxurious life and was ever anything more than how she sometimes described herself: a poor little bookseller.

III

I have already been quoting from the letters along the way, so let me turn to some synoptic remarks on the relationship between Stevens and his female Parisian bookseller as it appears from the correspondence. In this case, we have no pictures to go by. Although at one point Paule Vidal observed she had made the “sensational discovery” of two photographs of Stevens (WAS 2828), she apparently never sent any pictures of herself. The only superficial external descriptions we have are by Stevens’ transatlantic go-between and substitute traveler across Europe, Barbara Church. In 1951, for instance, Mrs. Church reported back to her friend in Hartford that “Mlle Vidal . . . is really very deaf” (WAS 3604). After a visit in 1952, she went on to explain about the bookseller’s red hair, hastening to add that she did not want “to disparage her when I told you about her deafness and red hair, even her deafness seems an attraction and I always liked red hair” (WAS 3610).

To understand the nature of the correspondence between Stevens and Paule Vidal better, we should begin by looking at the frequency of these

letters. During the core period of the exchange, from 1946 through 1954, a total of 183 surviving messages were exchanged—an average of more than 20 items per year. (Since in the first year, 1945, the war was still going on and both correspondents thought it fitting to postpone the resumption of business transactions until later, the epistolary exchange in that year is still limited. Likewise, in the year of Stevens' demise, 1955, the correspondence noticeably slackens.) For almost nine years, in other words, Wallace Stevens and Paule Vidal were in the habit of writing or receiving messages to or from each other every two to three weeks. The busiest years, correspondence-wise, were 1947 and 1948, with 26 and 24 items, respectively. Not coincidentally, this is also the period in which Stevens was most active in purchasing paintings through his Parisian bookseller. In the later years, he almost completely stopped doing so and stuck to his regular fare of books, magazines, and an occasional bookbinding. That is why in the years 1952 and 1954 the correspondence may be seen to shrink again to 13 and 14 items, respectively.

Predictably, there is considerable evolution in terms of the intimacy and familiarity with which the two correspondents addressed each other. At first, Paule Vidal's writing is still formal and commercially motivated as she tries to win back a prewar customer. She addresses Stevens impersonally as "Cher Monsieur" and finishes with the highly formal set phrase, "Veuillez agréer, Cher Monsieur, l'assurance de mes sentiments très distingués" (see her first letter of February 15, 1945; WAS 2806). Trying to gain her American customer's confidence, she assures Stevens she intends to go out of her way and be as devoted to him as her father was. (The two parties immediately decide to stick to the habit of writing in their respective languages, though this inevitably put Mademoiselle Vidal at a disadvantage and created one of the structural imbalances in the relationship: her English was not always good enough to understand all of Stevens' nuances.) In her earliest communications, then, Paule Vidal may still be seen to opt for almost comically impersonal constructions to refer to herself, such as, "On a procédé à une étude attentive des travaux" ["One has proceeded to an attentive study of the works"] [WAS 2809].)

Soon enough, however, a streak of independent whimsicality and good humor must have struck Stevens and warmed him to his new correspondent. Since as a woman Paule Vidal is not likely to have enjoyed a Sorbonne education like her father, she tended to spell and type rather recklessly. Early to late, her letters swarm with uncorrected spelling errors, grammatical mistakes, and typos. This helps create a sense of spontaneity that anticipates some of today's e-mail writing and online chat habits. While reading her letters, we get a strong sense of personal directness and unique voice that was much less outspoken in her father's more politely stiff and cultured prose. What Stevens must have been quick to perceive above all else was the woman's passionate, at times overanxious disposition and her captivating sense of humor. The latter is expressed

mainly through a love of hyperbole (underscored by countless exclamation marks) and a habit of cracking jokes—so much so that once the two correspondents have come to know each other better, we find her trying to crack a joke about once in every letter she sends. “Please don’t send me any more money for the time being,” for instance, she writes in 1947, “because I’m tempted to flee with it” (WAS 2820). Or she will dash off a quick letter after shipping a painting (the Pierre Tal-Coat that would inspire “Angel Surrounded by Paysans”) to tell her customer, “I am in a hurry to know your impression and as always I await your letter to know whether I have to commit harakiri!” (WAS 2839).

Needless to say, such attempts at jocularity and joviality were often invited by Stevens’ own quirky and laconic humor, which Paule Vidal seems to have been quick to interpret as a sign of personal interest and even desired intimacy—not being hampered as she was by the poet’s aloof and socially awkward reputation among those who met him in the flesh. Indeed, the pleasure both correspondents took in writing to each other in due time became an explicit, regular topic of the conversation. In December 1952, for example, Paule Vidal felt sufficiently at ease to send the following season’s greetings, to which Stevens would respond by saying they had given him particular pleasure:

May the coming year inspire in you beautiful poems for the greater happiness of the citizens of Uncle Sam, and the delicate pleasure of the sons and daughters of Marianne . . . who know English. I wish you a thousand good things, and don’t speak to me again of old age. The destiny of artists and poets is precisely not to grow old. And what to say then of a poet who is director of an insurance company! (WAS 2867)

For his own part, Stevens would come to reciprocate and confess his fondness for his Parisian friend by making typically roundabout observations such as, “I suppose that I ought not to be as happy to hear from anyone as I was to hear from you a day or two ago. I don’t mind your not sending Christmas cards but I should hate to think that anything had happened to my favorite bookseller or to my favorite book store” (WAS 2968). Similarly, he wrote the following indirect confession on November 12, 1952: “Considering how happy it makes me to receive letters from you (as if they were personal communications from the mews of literature), it is odd that I don’t do more to elicit them. But I suppose that it is one of the properties of growing old merely to wish to do things but not to do them” (WAS 2972).

One factor that arguably contributed greatly to the intimacy between the two correspondents was Stevens’ decision to change his tactic once he had picked up the thread where he had left it before the war by beginning to order paintings through Paule Vidal. Without bringing this up in

his letters to her, he silently cut out the role of critical middleman he had relied on with her father. Before the war, Stevens was fortunate to find Anatole Vidal so eager to help him in hunting down affordable paintings but, crucially, he did not trust in the bookseller's amateur opinion. Any painting to which the old Vidal steered his attention needed to be assessed by a certified expert before Stevens would consent to buying it. In most of the surviving correspondence, this expert is Paul Jamot, a famous art critic who was at the time Honorary Curator of the painting section at the Louvre as well as Director of the Museum of Fine Arts in the northern French city of Reims. (Jamot died in 1939. In his final surviving letter, Monsieur Vidal suggested replacing Jamot with Robert Ray, the Inspector-General of Fine Arts and Museums in France, who was responsible for all purchases of paintings by the French state [WAS 2669].) In a letter of November 14, 1937, in which Anatole Vidal reports on the purchase of Stevens' first painting by Jean Labasque (not yet the portrait of Vidal mentioned in "The Latest Freed Man"), Vidal proudly confirms he has fulfilled his promise "on the conditions demanded [by Stevens]:

I—I send you the work of an artist of great value but still unknown to the public.

II—This value is certified by an original document, delivered by the greatest critic of contemporary French art, who is little forthcoming with attestations of this kind.

III—The frame was chosen by the author of the canvas."
(WAS 2655)

In his dealings with Monsieur Vidal, in other words, Stevens was playing it safe by demanding that any purchase be underwritten by a confirmation of value from a leading expert. After the war, by contrast, this detour disappears overnight and it is left entirely to Paule Vidal herself, a mere amateur as much as her father, to make decisions for him. Understandably, this often put her in a quandary and filled her with more than a little anxiety, but it also betrayed greater confidence on Stevens' part and established a more intimate bond. In addition, it triggered an ongoing rhetoric of love and passion between the two as Stevens, time and again, insisted to his bookseller that she should go by her own hunches and decide on a painting for him only because she herself was excited and in love with it. The discourse that could thus develop is one in which both parties' desires were easily identified with each other, as if there existed some deeper union between kindred spirits. Indeed, it is striking to see how often "desire" as a term pops up on both sides of the correspondence. To be sure, such desire is usually located in, or displaced onto, the realm of artistic appreciation, but the concept may easily be extended to characterize the central motivating principle behind the entire epistolary relationship, not only because it is such a polysemous notion and may be configured

in such multiple ways, but also because it is fundamental to the poetry and worldview of Stevens in general. A closer look at the correspondence reveals how several kinds of desire are being exchanged on a more or less regular basis between Stevens and Mademoiselle Vidal. Let me illustrate this by pointing to some of the more erotic, economic, sociopolitical, or linguistic and sensuous desires at play in the letters.

There is, first, no mistaking the occasional erotic overtones in the correspondence. To be sure, the erotic games Stevens played with his safely distant, never more than imaginary French *maitresse* remain slight, innocuous, and wholly verbal. For the unmarried, culture-loving Mademoiselle Vidal, by contrast, the spatial distance seems to have been a source of notably greater frustration. If for Stevens his Parisian bookseller became one of very few women to assume at a distance some of the roles his wife Elsie did not always fulfill at home—somebody with a real passion for literature and paintings, who shared his love of things French, made a fuss over his each and every wish and rushed in to satisfy it, somebody also who showed herself a playful and witty interlocutor with considerable literary flair—then for the aging and unmistakably lonely single woman in Paris the great American poet and kindly teasing businessman filled in a space on the horizon she was much more eager to close. Among the most entertaining stock ingredients of Paule Vidal's letters are her ongoing, endlessly varied attempts at wooing Stevens to come over to Paris. Even after the poet made it clear, early on, that he no longer had any hopes of ever doing so, and even after Barbara Church, who took to frequenting the Parisian store as a kind of physical envoy, laughed away the possibility that he would ever do so, Mademoiselle Vidal doggedly persisted in reminding Stevens how much she would love to have him make the move and finally come visit her. At one point, in the spring of 1949, when business in Paris was particularly slack, she even suggested moving her shop over to New York. Just as the aging Stevens kept imagining Paris with barely repressed longing, Paule Vidal nourished a lifelong dream of moving to the U.S. (which, as far as we can tell, she never visited). Her favorite customer's response, however, was disheartening: in a long letter, Stevens advised her against making the step, arguing that there was no market for French bookstores in New York and that certainly she could not be kept alive by book-buying academics: "Professors in this country are just as poor as they are in France and my guess is that most of them borrow the books that they need from the university libraries" (WAS 2931).

Slightly enamored of her distinguished American correspondent as she appears to have been, Mademoiselle Vidal frequently sought to inure herself to her desires through self-disparaging remarks. Still, there is no mistaking the number of occasions when, on either side, gender relations, marriage, and their corresponding imagery are brought up in the letters—fleeting and jocularly much of the time, but often uncalled for by the issue at hand and with considerable *double entendre*. In June 1948,

for instance, Stevens opens a letter by joking, "I have not heard from you for so long that I am beginning to wonder whether you are in love" (WAS 2922), to which Mademoiselle Vidal made sure to reply two weeks later, "I do not want to let you cultivate any longer by my silence the idea that I am in love. You should know, dear sir . . . at my age, praise God, one is inoculated against such a calamity!" (WAS 2829).

Although libidinal desires are thus fleetingly in evidence, they are obviously secondary to the two correspondents' more material desires in what were, after all, principally business transactions. One of the things we may derive from going through the entire correspondence with Paule Vidal is a better sense of Stevens engaging in the acquisition of rare commodities and the accumulation of value attendant upon this. The decade we are talking about is one that was characterized by the transition from a frugal war economy to, in historian Lizabeth Cohen's words, a consumers' republic in which consumerism was consciously promoted as a civic duty to all patriotic Americans. Stevens, in his own tangential and idiosyncratically inflected way, may be seen to participate in this wider spending economy. In "'Beyond the Rhetorician's Touch': Stevens's Painterly Abstractions," Alan Filreis has contextualized the poet's purchasing habits by situating them against the postwar politics of producing and consuming art—in particular, the rise of abstract expressionism in America. Thus he has managed to demonstrate how Stevens went against the grain in purchasing foreign rather than domestic paintings and how the poet in Stevens then converted the traditionally figurative representations he imported from France into an American poetry of abstraction. But in doing so Filreis has presented Stevens' accumulation of French paintings as principally a political-artistic decision, which would need to be modified clearly by economic factors, especially in light of the exchange rate between the plummeting French franc and the American dollar.

In Brazeau's oral biography of Stevens, Bernard Heringman remembers talking to the poet about the paintings he bought in Paris: "at least once he mentioned that things were cheaper in Paris than in New York. He liked getting things cheap" (201). The unpublished correspondence clearly documents how the same years in which Stevens placed orders with Mademoiselle Vidal saw the French franc plummet from what was already dirt cheap—about 100 francs to every American dollar—to more than 350 francs per dollar.⁷ In her edition of her father's letters, Holly Stevens understandably cut out almost all of the financial transactions between the two parties. The editorial decision made good sense in terms of overall readability and general literary appeal, yet it has inevitably also obscured the monetary side of the transactions—including the constant generosity on the part of Stevens, who frequently sent larger sums of money than the small Parisian bookseller was expecting and insisted over and over again she should not hesitate to take a sizable commission for herself. Partly because of this, Paule Vidal clearly came to look upon

her favorite international customer as a major private benefactor, one who as a sympathizing and caring individual embodied the larger structural economic aid provided by his country in a time of difficult reconstruction. To her, Stevens was not only the purveyor, but also the embodiment of a desire for luxury items during a period in which she reported on the slow and long-awaited return of such simple daily commodities as soap and chocolate (WAS 2836).

In this light, it is not entirely surprising to see that at a more socio-political level the correspondence offers an ongoing exchange of ideals of postwar Western society, usually at the instigation of Stevens' French correspondent, who brought up politics more readily than Stevens was inclined to do. Already in one of her first letters, Paule Vidal inquired into Stevens' views of president Truman (WAS 2810). Finding her first impressions confirmed by her correspondent, she went on in a follow-up letter to praise Truman's "intelligent and courageous" response to "the recent strikes in the U.S.," throwing in that the man had to her mind also "beautiful intelligent eyes" (WAS 2811). She would continue this line of conversation on several occasions. Thus, she expressed surprise at Truman's 1948 reelection (WAS 2832); lashed out at the "whole gang of communists" who according to her were working at the Comptoir National d'Escompte (the French national discount bank [WAS 2833]); lamented the lack of courage and energy among political leaders in 1950 (WAS 2844); and repeatedly dwelled on the Korean War. She also interspersed her letters by describing a visit to a Parisian "Salon d'automobile" in terms of "rendering homage to the American Industry" (WAS 2825) and impressed upon Stevens how she had always loved North America and would always do so (WAS 2826). In his own attempts at satisfying his bookseller's desire for political conversation, we find Stevens resorting to his customary strategies of humor and imaginative indirection, as when he reports on the winter of 1950 by saying, "While this has been a mild winter, its very mildness has caused endless mist and rain and everyone is as sick and tired of the bad weather as if it was propaganda of the Communists. Personally, I am desperately for Liberty and Sunshine" (WAS 2943). Occasionally, however, he would drop such playfulness and testify to how much the political climate of his day could weigh down on him as a citizen. Thus, on December 12, 1951, he wrote to Mademoiselle Vidal:

My principal reason for writing to you today . . . is not to order . . . books but to wish you a merry Christmas and to wish you and the world in general, and particularly the world of Europe, a happier New Year. It almost seems as if someone was assassinating us. But then we see all about us people who pay no attention to this and who are apparently happy and apparently prosperous. Perhaps they are right or, if they are not right, perhaps they are wiser than those who stop to think and to

compare the state of affairs as it is with what it might be. (WAS 2965)

When Stevens thought it wiser to relieve himself of the weight of the political world, he typically preferred to concentrate on aesthetic sensations and art making. To close this brief sketch of his friendship with Mademoiselle Vidal, let me point therefore to some of the more linguistic and sensuous desires that are no less evident from the correspondence. These are for obvious reasons most apparent on Stevens' part, though they are by no means restricted to his side of the conversation. In her own passionate, direct, and spontaneous writing style, Paule Vidal, too, displayed a sensitivity to verbal and aesthetic play (she was after all a bookseller), responding with marked pleasure to Stevens' at times mysterious, elusive, and often imaginative formulations. In the poet's own case, his lifelong love of lexical and acoustic *trouvailles* is most clearly reflected in the way he sometimes mined the French bookseller's letters for striking idiomatic turns or tropes or captivating sounds. We can see the material traces of this in his occasional highlighting of French phrases that apparently stimulated him—for instance, Paule Vidal's description of a painting by Roland Oudot as "picqué de coquelicots," a phrase he underlined for himself (WAS 2817). At such moments, we are reminded that the Crispin in Stevens, who loved to fill "The Comedian as the Letter C" with endless c's, q's, and x's, and who remembered staging the "coquelicot" as part of Saint Ursula's offering to the "good Lord" (17) in one of his earliest published poems, survived unbroken into old age.

The letters allow us to watch an ongoing exchange of more visual aesthetic sensations as well. Perhaps most revealing in this respect is the predominant focus on color and light when the two correspondents were discussing paintings, at the expense of such elements as shape and structure. That is, their talk centered more on the tools of impressionist painters than on those of figurative or abstract artists. About the first painting Paule Vidal purchased for Stevens, Camille Bombois' *Le Loiret à Olivet*, she reported how "it illuminates the room" (WAS 2816). Later, she described a visit to another painter's studio by calling herself "enchanted by his color, by the light of his canvases, in one word by his great talent," adding that a Mediterranean seascape in particular "bathed in a colored and honest light that constitutes joy to the eye"—an expression that again must have pricked the poet in Stevens, since he underlined the final four words—"la joie des yeux"—in red pencil (WAS 2878). Such comments are by no means limited to paintings alone. Paule Vidal would slyly tap into Stevens' shared appreciation for color and light when trying to have her beloved American customer visit her. After Stevens had once again wistfully told her, in 1952, he would not be making any such voyage, she replied, "still, despite your sighs, I have the impression that Paris in itself does not exert a great attraction on you. And yet, if you were to see its sky when night falls, at the tip

of the Ile de la Cité, with on the quai a string of astonished clochards, it is worth the voyage, I assure you" (WAS 2865).

When in July 1953 Stevens' Parisian bookseller was hunting for a painting by Roger Bezombes, she was particularly struck by a representation of the Loire in front of the château d'Amboise, which she went on to describe as follows: "The Loire runs violet, as if charged by amethyst, and behind the château the hills run up in large blue and green hues. This canvas has hit me in the eye and when I say hit that's precisely what I mean, considering its vigor" (WAS 2872). Stevens responded by pointing out, "My only possible objection to [the painting] is that it may be a view and what I want is a pure painting. I mean by this that I care nothing about the Chateau d'Amboise but I do care for the colors of the work" (WAS 2978). On the basis of this instruction, Paule Vidal second-guessed her first judgment. Revisiting the painting, she claimed to be less enchanted with it, adding, "What had attracted me was the color, the violet of the water, the blue and the green of the sky. The painting is decidedly warm, but there is the chateau, well drawn, and the sketch of the adjoining houses. I fear very much, then, that it will not please you" (WAS 2873). Dialogues such as these help us consider, or reconsider, the place of elements such as color and light, as against shape and structure, in Stevens' pictorially inspired poems from the same, abstraction-oriented period. To Paule Vidal, certainly, the evocation of pictorial sensations to a sophisticated poet proved both an ongoing linguistic challenge and a repeated source of frustration and despair. When the latter took over, she would characteristically throw up her arms and complain, "It is quite difficult, you know, to define the impression a painting makes. It is a sensation, a physical shock, and to describe it is no longer of the same order: it is literature, a transposition" (WAS 2873). Even though she could never make head or tail of Stevens' published poetry, not even when she had a female cousin translate some of the poems into French for her, she never stopped being aware of his almost overbearing status as a sophisticated poet—"one of the great poets of the U.S.A.," as Barbara Church insisted to her and as she duly reported back to her customer in Hartford (WAS 2840).

IV

The closeness that developed between the reclusive Hartford poet and his lively Parisian bookseller was such that by January of the year in which he died, Wallace Stevens could write to Paule Vidal saying, "there is no one to whom I wish more good fortune than I do you" (WAS 2994). His final letter to the French woman is dated May 13, 1955, and concludes by waving adieu: "Goodbye for the present. I hope that fortune will be kinder to you in the future than it has been in the past. We can never have any courage except our own. Best of luck to you" (WAS 2995). We know nothing of Paule Vidal's future beyond these words of hope about it. The only kindness the future apparently has had in store for her and her father lies

in our acknowledgement of the unending generosity both these people showed in bringing their country of France alive to Stevens' distant but capable imagination.

University of Antwerp
Belgium

Notes

¹Here and elsewhere in the text, all translations from the French letters of Anatole and Paule Vidal are my own. Errors in spelling, typos, and eccentricities of punctuation have been silently corrected to facilitate the reading. I was able to study the surviving parts of the Stevens-Vidal correspondence, which are part of the Wallace Stevens Collection at the Henry E. Huntington Library in San Marino, California, during the summer of 2003. I am deeply grateful to the Fletcher Jones Foundation for the fellowship that allowed me to do so. Quotations from the correspondence and the two photographs of Anatole Vidal are reproduced here with kind permission of the Huntington Library. Many thanks are due to Sue Hodson and Gayle M. Richardson of the Huntington for providing me with reproductions of the pictures, as well as to the staff of the Huntington for their overall hospitality and professionalism. I would like to extend my gratitude to Lisa Goldfarb for having me try out an early version of the present essay during the Wallace Stevens Society Panel at the 17th annual conference of the American Literature Association in San Francisco, May 27, 2006. Finally, I am indebted to Eva Pszeniczko of Ghent University for practical assistance in gathering secondary materials.

²Wallace Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 208. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with page number only in parentheses.

³In Richardson's thousand-plus pages, the figure of Anatole Vidal is never fleshed out and his daughter Paule fares only marginally better; by contrast, Filreis did publish two separate essays—one in *Poetics Today*, another in *American Literary History*—that are built on a close consideration of certain of Stevens' dealings with Paule Vidal, although these essays do not directly address the facts and nature of the relationship.

⁴Stevens' preserved correspondence with Paule Vidal consists of 110 pieces; the most interesting letters have been reproduced, completely or in large part, in *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, selected by Holly Stevens; yet even then it is good to remind ourselves that almost two thirds—71 of the 110 items—were not included in this edition and have not been reprinted in any form so far.

⁵So far my attempts at fleshing out the biographies of Anatole and Paule Vidal are almost entirely limited to evidence from the letters. In the absence of any traceable relatives of the Vidal family, it proves to be peculiarly hard to dig up further details about their lives—even as much as their dates of birth and death. Late in the production process of this essay, Anne Luyat reports from France she has been able to find out, through a friend of hers, that Anatole Vidal was born on August 14, 1869, in Le Faou (Finistère), about 40 kilometers from the town of Brest in Brittany, and that he died on September 30, 1944, in Paris. Similar information on his daughter Paule is currently still lacking. There is in France no easily accessible national instrument for tracing the lives of deceased citizens, nor are French government agencies in the habit yet of putting interesting historical documentation online. I have contacted various Vidals by e-mail, including academics who happen to have an analogous connection with Brazil, but none of them are apparently related to Stevens' correspondents.

⁶Named after Patricia de Nicolai, the shop sells products by the only company still manufacturing perfumes inside Paris. It has recently begun to specialize in custom-made perfumes tailored to the wishes of individual clients. There is thus a fitting historical link with Paule Vidal's earlier occupation of the spot, considering her similar habit of tailoring to Stevens' each and every wish as well as her own recorded interest in perfumes (at one point she wishes to know the U.S. price of a perfume by Patou called Joy [WAS 2867], to which Stevens responds by confessing he is "wild with curiosity to know the reason for your interest" [WAS 2974]).

⁷Consider, by contrast, the exchange rates between the French franc and the U.S. dollar in the final three decades of the twentieth century (before the euro came to supersede the national French currency): during this entire period the rate varied on an annual basis between 4.0 and 9.7 francs to a single dollar (see the archive information on Triacom.com). Readers interested in the monetary side of Stevens' transactions with the Vidals, and especially his purchase of paintings through them, will be interested in the following facts and figures. On all occasions, I am listing French francs first, then converting these into contemporary dollars (approximate figures based on annual exchange rates calculated through measuringworth.com) and then into today's dollars (approximate conversions to purchasing power in 2006 calculated through the same Web site). What we then find is that despite the gigantic jump in the French bills for paintings Stevens was receiving from the Vidals between 1935 and 1954 (going up from around 2500 to 170,000 francs), he was barely changing his habit of sending occasional checks of some \$200–\$300 on average; given the raises he must have enjoyed in the meantime from his employer and the way in which prices for paintings within the U.S. were rising fast in the postwar years, it is safe to conclude he was getting paintings cheaper over the years by continuing to order them straight from Paris through his French connection.

The earliest financial balance mentioned in the correspondence with Anatole Vidal shows Stevens had an outstanding credit of 2729.75 French francs (ca. \$180 then/\$2640 now) on November 7, 1935, to which he was adding a check of another 1500 francs (ca. \$100/\$1470) (WAS 2650). When in 1937 his Parisian bookseller procured him a drawing by the famous impressionist Camille Pissarro entitled *Pontoise-Les-Choux*, he managed to do so at a bargain price of 2500 francs (ca. \$100/\$1400), augmented by what was apparently Monsieur Vidal's standard commission of 10% (WAS 2653). Stevens then asked Vidal to keep his eyes peeled for talented painters who would be happy to sell paintings at about the same price of 2500 francs (WAS 2654). By July 1938, however, he was already paying 6000 francs (ca. \$170/\$2430) for a painting by Maurice Brianchon (WAS 2659), and in March 1939 Henri Lebasque's *Les baigneuses sur la plage* cost him 9500 francs (ca. \$240/\$3480) (WAS 2660). We do not know the price for Jean Lebasque's portrait of Vidal mentioned in "The Latest Freed Man." The last time Stevens beefed up his account with Monsieur Vidal, in April 1940, he sent a check of 15,000 francs (ca. \$310/\$4450) (WAS 2668). After the war, Paule Vidal explained prices had made a quantum leap: in March 1946, she informed Stevens he should expect to be paying between 40,000–60,000 francs per painting (WAS 2810). Stevens then bought Camille Bombois' *Le Loiret à Olivet* for 40,000 francs (ca. \$335/\$3455), having inquired into the possibility of purchasing a Matisse but being sobered up by Mademoiselle Vidal's informing him he would need to shell out at least 400,000 francs in that case (WAS 4261). By December 1948, Paule Vidal was encountering difficulties with the sums wired by Stevens: a check for 100,000 francs (ca. \$325/\$2720) could not be cleared and from that moment onwards Stevens had to make sure he sent checks to the value of less than 50,000 francs each (WAS 2833). The invoice of October 1949 demonstrates that at 75,000 francs (ca. \$225/\$1900) the Tal-Coat still life that was to inspire "Angel Surrounded by Paysans" was, in absolute numbers, the most expensive painting bought by Stevens until then (but that it was by no means so in relative numbers compared to some of the

prewar paintings), and that it was customary for Paule Vidal by then to charge a commission of 15%, so that she made 11,250 francs on the transaction (WAS 2840). Finally, when in March 1954, Paule Vidal arranged for a painting by Jules Cavaillès entitled *Port de Cannes*, she finished by paying the treacherously grand sum of 170,000 francs (ca. \$485/\$3640) out of Stevens' account (WAS 2882).

Works Cited

- Bates, Milton J. *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1985.
- Brazeau, Peter. *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered*. New York: Random House, 1983.
- Church, Barbara. Correspondence from Barbara Church to Wallace Stevens, 1950–1953. WAS 3589–3637. Wallace Stevens Collection. Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California.
- Cohen, Elizabeth. *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*. New York: Knopf, 2003.
- Filreis, Alan. " 'Beyond the Rhetorician's Touch': Stevens's Painterly Abstractions." *American Literary History* 4.2 (Summer 1992): 230–63.
- . "Still Life without Substance: Wallace Stevens and the Language of Agency." *Poetics Today* 10.2 (Summer 1989): 345–72.
- . *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991.
- Lensing, George. *Wallace Stevens and the Seasons*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2001.
- Longenbach, James. *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things*. New York: Oxford UP, 1991.
- MacLeod, Glen. *Wallace Stevens and Modern Art: From the Armory Show to Abstract Expressionism*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1993.
- Richardson, Joan. *Wallace Stevens: The Early Years, 1879–1923*. New York: William Morrow, 1986.
- . *Wallace Stevens: The Later Years, 1923–1955*. New York: William Morrow, 1988.
- Sharpe, Tony. *Wallace Stevens: A Literary Life*. London: Macmillan, 2000.
- Stevens, Wallace. Correspondence from Wallace Stevens to Barbara Church, 1950–1953. WAS 3726–3801. Wallace Stevens Collection. Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California.
- . Correspondence from Wallace Stevens to Paule Vidal, 1945–1955. WAS 2886–2995. Wallace Stevens Collection. Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California.
- . *Letters of Wallace Stevens*. Ed. Holly Stevens. New York: Knopf, 1966.
- . *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson. New York: Library of America, 1997.
- Vidal, Anatole. Correspondence from Anatole Vidal to Wallace Stevens, 1935–1940. WAS 2649–2669. Wallace Stevens Collection. Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California.
- Vidal, Paule. Correspondence from Paule Vidal to Wallace Stevens, 1945–1955. WAS 2806–2885. Wallace Stevens Collection. Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

The Whispering Troubadour and the Interior Paramour: Courtly Love in Wallace Stevens

AURORE CLAVIER

I am not a troubadour and I think the public reading of poetry is something truly ghastly.

—Wallace Stevens

ALTHOUGH HE DID sometimes read his work in public, Wallace Stevens turned down speaking requests at an early stage in his career in a way that suited the legend of the discreet and sedentary vice president of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company. Contrary to the more noticeably Bohemian character Ezra Pound posed as—retracing the steps of the troubadours in *The Spirit of Romance* or in the little booklets that would later be collected in *A Walking Tour in Southern France: Ezra Pound Among the Troubadours*—Stevens rarely, and most obliquely, referred to the art of love poetry as it was conceived and elaborated in 12th and 13th Provençal France, before spreading among the *trouvères* of northern France—the *Pays d’Oil*—and the minstrels of the Saxon world. He neither translated the forgotten songs of the *langue d’Oc*, nor mimicked the voices of medieval *jongleurs*, as the ventriloquist of *Personae* playfully did. Yet, that the poet should oppose the secretive poetic meditations that characterized even his editorial practice and the courtly fashion of the *fin’amor* hints at the paradoxical links tying together Stevens’ voicing of the mind’s intimacy and the often hidden, intricate hinges of the *grand chant courtois* in medieval poetics.

In her introduction to *Words Chosen Out of Desire*, Helen Vendler regrets that the universe of Stevens should so often be viewed as a “‘ghost world’” (5), a mere “collection of ideas” (4), a difficult poetry precluding feeling, the critics thereby omitting “the intense satisfaction he felt when desire found names for his local objects” (7). Barbara Fisher further develops the idea that the tension between *eros* and *caritas*, physical desire and spiritual love, is the true spur to Stevens’ poetic explorations, quoting one of the “Adagia,” which forcefully strengthens Vendler’s analysis of “Local Objects”: “In poetry, you must love the words, the ideas and images and rhythms with all your capacity to love anything at all.”¹ Even more than

the fulfillment of love, both critics insist on the “recognition of the *positive* value of negation in Stevens’s work” (Fisher 37). Desire, hunger, poverty, loss, wintry minimalism are therefore enhanced as the many states out of which creation can spring, as the true motives of Stevens’ verse.

It therefore seems that the repression of poetic libido is precisely the breach from which the troubadour’s voice can seep through. Seeing the Stevensian theater of verse as a “ghost world” hollowed out of its flesh also enables the “spirit of romance” to circulate, the whole declensions of the breath to be heard, from “the hymns / That fall . . . out of the wind” (402) to the more subtle “droning sibilants” and silent “sea-sounds” (69) of “Two Figures in Dense Violet Night.” Stevens’ voice is that of a whispering troubadour and his love poetry finds a most melodious resonance with medieval poets precisely when it is hushed, contained, repressed.

It comes as no surprise then that “Cy Est Pourtraicte Madame Ste Ursule, Et les Unze Mille Vierges,” one of the first pieces to spin the medieval imagery of sensuous and religious craving through an explicit Old French title, should lay stress on the martyr’s “low accord, / Half prayer and half ditty,” answered by the Lord’s “subtle quiver / That was not heavenly love, / Or pity” (17). The poem sheds light on the visual sensuality of the Lady’s dress, “in red and gold brocade” reflected in the “Blue, gold, pink, and green” (17) of the flowers she lays on the altar. The reader is in turn reminded of the *mille fleurs* of a tapestry—one might think of *The Lady with the Unicorn*, another allegory of chastity and divine love, or of the changing colors in a stained glass-window representing the martyrdom of Sainte Ursule, and of the illumination on an old manuscript—such as that of Soissons containing the “tale of the juggler,” as cited in a letter from Stevens to his fiancée in December 1909 and mentioned by Fisher in the beginning of her chapter “Ambiguous Birds and Quizzical Messengers.” But the lush iconography of the poem is immediately counterpoised by the delicacy of the verse, since the page is carved into an alternation of tale-like tetrameters and much shorter lines displaying the key words of the poem as if they were taken out of a casket. The rhythmical pattern wavers between the profusion of the *mille fleurs* and the purer allegorical composition of the sacred flowery offering (“The marguerite and coquelicot / And roses”), or it unfolds from “prayer” to love “ditty” and then to a final unvoiced quiver that is not “pity.” The oscillating rhythm reveals the confusion between the pleasure garden and the virgin’s *hortus conclusus*—the enclosed garden of religious virtue—between pagan courtship and heavenly ecstasy, before ending on a dense couplet that shuts the medieval manuscript, erasing the writing and hushing the persona’s already distant voice: “This is not writ / In any book.”

As the poem suggests, Stevens’ *canso* is destined to remain *in petto*, to be sung *sotto voce*, but never quite fixed on a score or an ancient scroll. This might be the reason why so many love lyrics are meant to be heard at night or at dawn, such as a serenade or an aubade, urging one to become

“the voice of night,” to “Use dusky words and dusky images” (69). The overwhelming presence of shade is brought to the fore by the silent choreography of “Two Figures in Dense Violet Night,” or by the ever-changing symmetries of the veiled *you* and *I* in “Re-Statement of Romance”—secrecy is here emphasized as soon as the chiasmic closure of the first line: “The night knows nothing of the chants of night” (118). In this poem, the verse seems to revolve upon itself, to revert its way, and to draw the contours of a true stanza, as it is defined in the frontispiece of Giorgio Agamben’s beautiful series of essays on speech and fantasy:

STANZA, s.f.: 1) demeure, pièce, lieu de séjour;
 2) stance poétique: les poètes du XIII^e me siècle appelaient *stanza* l’élément constitutif de leur poésie, parce qu’il formait avec les diverses composantes formelles de la *canzone* le foyer de ce *joi d’amour* qu’ils assignaient comme unique objet à l’activité (frontispiece)

[STANZA, n.: 1) a residence, a room, a dwelling;
 2) a poetical stanza: 13th century poets named stanza the basic unit of their poetry because, along with the varied formal elements of the canzone, it was the hearth of the joy of love which they fixed as the only object of their activity²]

The domestic image of the stanza as a bride chamber, a *camera oscura* enabling the absent lover’s image to be conjured up and praised, interestingly turns the open landscape of “Two Figures in Dense Violet Night” into an intimate space shed by the voice and the ear only (“Be the voice of night and Florida in my ear” [69]). “On the Road Home” makes the room of the stanza even more palpable as it softly condensates the purely temporal dissolution of the two voices (“It was when I said, / . . . It was when you said” [186]) into a full-rounded quatrain of sensual fulfillment, the *locus amoenus*—the pleasant landscape of Latin and Medieval poetry—for the *joi d’amor* to spread:

It was at that time, that the silence was largest
 And longest, the night was roundest,
 The fragrance of the autumn warmest,
 Closest and strongest. (186)

The rhyming superlatives that Vendler associates with a Platonic harmonious and expanding whole are strongly reminiscent of the coexistence of a miniaturized and a magnified decor in her analysis of the tropical version of the European *locus amoenus* as it is sketched out in “Of Mere Being.”

Although the space of the poem grows rounder and rounder, more and more intimate, the shape of the poet’s mindscape is brought to the fore.

This is what "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," as interpreted by Fisher, beautifully illustrates. The colloquy gives way to the soliloquy, and the voice of the beloved is not only attuned to but also fully integrated in that of the poet, as if it were absorbed into the sphere of light cast by the candle. The coupling of the voices is reflected within the very lines studded with prepositions related to inwardness—and exacerbated by the hidden echoes in the sound or suffix *in*—skillfully placed at the beginning and the end of the stanzas, when not sheltered at the very core of a line:

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

Within a single thing, a single shawl
Wrapped tightly round us, *since* we are poor, a warmth,
A light, a power, the miraculous *influence*. (444)

Interestingly enough, the poem is one of the central pieces of Stevens' last collection, *The Rock*, and it corresponds to the more obsessively meditative phase of the poet's career. The opening and closing stanzas invite the paramour to rejoin the broader reign of the "central mind," the stage of Stevens' reflections on reality and the imagination, wavering between the projections of the candle light and the "world imagined":

Light the first light of evening, as in a room
In which we rest and, for small reason, think
The world imagined is the ultimate good.
.....
Out of this same light, out of the central mind,
We make a dwelling in the evening air,
In which being there together is enough. (444)

If the "first light of evening" can be viewed as a sun where "There are no shadows" (136), the source of a Platonic revelation of "the ultimate good," of a truth stripped of illusions, as often staged in Stevens' poems of solar or transparent epiphany, from "The Snow Man" to "The Man on the Dump," it is also cast as a round halo around the lens of the central mind. Seen from an American perspective, the poem could thereby be shown to waver between Emerson's convex and deforming eye and the "transparent eye-ball" ("Nature" 10), while the persona is left to hesitate between the iconic "golden woman" and her reflection "in a silver mirror" (393). On this point the subtle Stevensian meditation seems to answer to a question raised hundreds of years before. After demonstrating the importance of the myth of Narcissus in the Middle-Ages and showing how the nymph's son does not so much fall in love with himself as with an image in

the water—just as Pygmalion becomes enamored of an effigy—Agamben tackles the vast medieval theory of perception in his chapter “Eros With the Mirror.” Analyzing a particular passage where the physician Averroes explains how one perceives objects through the intermediary of the eye humor and of the air, Agamben comments:

Tout le processus cognitif y est perçu comme une spéculation au sens strict, comme une réflexion de miroir en miroir: reflétant la forme de l’objet, les yeux et le sens participent de l’eau et du miroir, mais l’imagination aussi est spéculative, qui “imagine” les fantasmes en l’absence de l’objet. (136)

[The whole cognitive process is here perceived as speculation, in the strict sense of the word, as a reflection from one mirror to the next: the eyes reflect the shape of the object and partake of water and the mirror; but the imagination too is speculative, since it “imagines” the fantasies when the object is absent.]

Confronted with an ever-elusive object, one’s sensations are bound to remain a reflection, a “fantasy.” As Agamben phrases it, “The fantasy is foregrounded as the origin and the object of love, and the domain of *eros* is displaced from vision to the imagination” (137). Although Stevens’ questioning keeps in balance reality and the imagination, always striving to strip the world of its illusions while still dwelling on them, he also repeatedly insists that “The point of vision and desire are the same,” that “next to love is the desire for love” (398). The beloved cannot but be seen as an object recreated *in absentia* and be replaced by a “soaring of metaphors” doomed to remain at a distance with its ideal object, as Julia Kristeva observes:

Impossible, inadéquat, immédiatement allusif quand on le voudrait le plus direct, le langage amoureux est envol de métaphores: il est de la littérature. Singulier, je ne l’admets qu’en première personne.

[Impossible, inadequate, immediately allusive when one would wish it to be the more direct, the language of love is a soaring of metaphors: it is literature. Unique, I only tolerate it in the first person. (9)]

Faced with the beloved’s deferral or rejection, which stands at the core of the troubadours’ poetry of joyful suffering—a paradoxical topos in courtly love and in Renaissance Petrarchism—the Provençal poet relished the sheer mental image of the woman in the wake of Bertran de Born, who praised a “domna soisseubuda,” a borrowed or imagined lady, in the famous “*Domna, puous de me nous chal*” [“Lady, Since You Care Nothing For

Me],” translated and reinterpreted by Pound. What finally came to the fore were the singer’s own powers of composition, as displayed in many *coblas* (the first stanza in a *canso*), from Bernart de Ventadorn’s supercilious “No marvel if my song’s the best / Of any sung by troubadour” (trans. Snodgrass; Kehew 97) to Arnaut Daniel’s cautious measure of formal constraints, “Though this measure quaint confine me, / And I chip out words and plane them, / They shall yet be true and clear, / When I finally have filed them” (trans. Snodgrass; Kehew 219), not to mention Guillem de Peiteus, the legendary first troubadour and his strange song of nothing: “Sheer nothing’s what I’m singing of” (trans. Snodgrass; Kehew 27).

Despite her central position in the love lyric, the woman is almost inevitably erased by the lyric persona. Poetry about love becomes a pretext, a true preliminary to poetry talking about itself. The lady’s deferral, a *topos* of Provençal poetry or Petrarchism, is sublimated into a composition in which the lyric *I* finally denies any literary existence to the very object of its song. Barbara Estrin focuses on this particular process when she parallels Stevens’ “So-and-So Reclining on Her Couch” and a few of Alberto Giacometti’s sculptures, staging the essential void and elusiveness in feminine representation, using Giacometti’s *Femme Couchée Qui Rêve*, *Mains Tenant le Vide*, and *Objets Suspendus* as her main inspiration. The illusion of a vague and impersonal name given to the sculptor’s model is strikingly reminiscent of the *senhal*—or pseudonym—of the troubadour’s *dame*, who remained anonymous, not so much for social reasons (the *domna* sung by the poet had to belong to a higher order and was often the lord’s wife) as for poetry’s sake, so as to let the singer step to the fore. Indeed, the impersonal delineation of “So-and-So” is intensified as the poet blurs her curves into “motionless gesture[s]” (262) and a series of geometrical “Projection[s].” The model “So-and-So” gives way to isolated letters, paradigms of mathematical hypotheses: “Drifting into abstraction, ‘So-and-So’ gradually declines as she reclines, even in her status as object” (Estrin 21). Using the figures of Narcissus and Echo, as well as that of Pygmalion, Estrin demonstrates how the artist finally appropriates the woman’s (pro-) creative powers: “Absorbing the woman’s creativity means sucking back Echo; the artist swells with her capacity to spawn” (43). The woman singer and the mother, respectively, of “The Idea of Order at Key West” and “The Woman That Had More Babies than That,” from whom stem a sea-like matrix of verse, must therefore yield before the male creator, the Medusa-like sculptor, who, strikingly enough, rears his head at the end of the latter poem and eventually fixes the shape of the woman: “If her head / Stood on a plain of marble, high and cold; / If her eyes were chinks in which the sparrows built; / If she was deaf with falling grass in her ears—” (203). The more absorbed the woman gets in the poet’s sculpture, the harder to decipher her silhouette. She is truly petrified into the celebrated “*stanza my stone*” (186).

As the object of the verse gets blurred by the artist's touch, the poetic stanza passes from the intimate shelter of thought welcoming an ideal woman to the closed space, the hermetic and "venerable complication" (275), in the Provençal tradition of the trobar clus, the intricate style opposed to the lighter and simpler pieces of the trobar leu. "Darken your speech" (69), the persona asks of his lover in "Two Figures in Dense Violet Night," in a way that strangely resounds with Raimbaud d'Orange's words: "Cars bruns et teinz mots entrebec / pensius pensans" ["Ponderingly pondering / I intertwine rare, dark and colored words"]. Precisely, this effort to create a rich "materia poetica" (901) made of inkhorn words obscured and hued by "the sound of the foreign" (see Rieke), interlaced together in a sophisticated tapestry of correspondences, is what Stevens reveals through his taste for puns and double entendres. Kristeva pinpoints the ambiguous density of language in the passage of her *Histoires d'Amour* [*Love Stories*] dedicated to the troubadours, and more particularly to Arnault Daniel, the "master of the trobarric [rich poetry], "il miglior fabbro" praised by Dante and by Ezra Pound":

L'ambiguïté . . . se loge dans le vocabulaire courtois lui-même, toujours érotique et sentimental à la fois, mais elle tisse ici le sens profond de l'état amoureux en tant que tel. . . . [Elle] plonge le lecteur dans l'incertitude, la réversibilité et la contamination sémantique aussi bien que phonique des signes, qui porte à son zénith l'ambiguïté du sens métaphorique. (353–54)

[Ambiguity . . . resides in courtly vocabulary itself, always both erotic and sentimental, but here it weaves the deep meaning of the very state of love. . . . [It] throws the reader into uncertainty, reversibility and the semantic and phonic contamination of signs, through which the ambiguity of metaphorical meaning reaches a climax.]

Such an insistence on the secret folds of language surfaces, for instance, behind the lewd echoes between the chaste legend of the "Unze Mille Vigeres" and the bawdy title of an erotic novel, *Les Onze Mille Verges* (1907), attributed to Guillaume Apollinaire and long hidden in the shameful corners of libraries (as the unwritten episode of Stevens' poem might have been). "One of Those Hibiscuses of Damozels," an uncollected poem of 1942, the title of which also relishes the exoticism of Old French sonorities, makes an even more obvious use of the phonic closeness and semantic opposition analyzed by Kristeva. The art of blazonry is here ferociously parodied as the lady portrayed is exposed as nothing more than a miscellany of vain attributes, a collection of "ball-like beads, . . . bazzling and . . . banging beads" (592), hardly hiding the corruptible flesh torn into pieces by the persona: "She was all / Of her airs, as surely cologne as that she was bone / Was what she was and flesh, sure enough, but airs; / Rather

rings than fingers, rather fingers than hands" (592). The obsessive return of the pair "air/hair" further drives the wedge of this *vanitas* (a much codified painting of vanity, where objects reveal the true purpose of the artist). The details of the lady's image are nothing but "air," and the poet's inspiration quickly grows stale, as the repetitions and the hackneyed comparisons suggest in the final climax of a nonsensical depiction: "You saw the eye-blue, sky-blue, eye-blue, and the powdered ears / And the cheeks like flower-pots under her hair" (592).

The cubist representation of "So-and-So Reclining on Her Couch" is turned into a surrealist portrait. One thinks of René Magritte's *The Rape*, a painting where the artist replaced the lineaments of the lady with the crude sexual attributes of the woman. As if he aimed at adding one more level of complication, Stevens indulges in a reversal of the very tradition he so subtly plays upon, just as the troubadours themselves often did. Fisher insists on the importance of parody, and she reminds us of the etymology of the word: it comes from the Greek *para*, beside, and *oidia*, singing; that is, it means "literally 'at the side of the singing' or, roughly, 'countersong'" (24). Fisher reminds us that Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of parody is built from this notion of countersong: "every 'high' genre (epic, lyric, tragedy) has generated a countervailing mode, a comical parodic counterpart . . . [as Bakhtin says,] 'the corrective of laughter and criticism to all existing straightforward genres, languages, styles, voices: to force men to experience beneath these categories a different and contradictory reality that is otherwise not captured in them'" (24).

In the context of love poetry and of the woman's constant deferral of any sensual bind, the countersong also appears as a comical oral or literary counterpart to the side-glance Pascal Quignart studies in *Le Sexe et l'Effroi*. He reveals the depth of the Latin word *fascinatio*, relating it to *fascinus*, the equivalent of the Greek *phallos*. He continues:

Les chants qui l'entourent s'appellent "fescennins." Le *fascinus* arrête le regard au point qu'il ne peut s'en détacher. Les chants qu'il inspire sont à l'origine de l'invention romaine du roman: la *satura*.

La fascination est la perception de l'angle mort du langage. Et c'est pourquoi ce regard est toujours latéral. (11)

[The songs which accompany the *fascinus* are called "fescennins." The *fascinus* stops the gaze so that it cannot turn away from it. The songs it inspires are the origin of the Roman invention of the roman/novel: the *satura*.

Fascination is the perception of this dead angle in language. And that is why the gaze is always slanting.]

The obliquity of the look when faced with the fascination of the body is made clear in the ironical scrutiny of "So-and-So Reclining on Her Couch,"

when the lady's sensuality is denied in a series of prismatic projections partaking of a mathematical model.

Stevens' parody reflects an ironical conception of nothingness, and it finally paves the way for what Jacques Roubaud defines as the true way to philosophical negativity, an intellectual parallel to negative theology that was being developed at the time of the troubadours. He thus quotes from Kierkegaard, inspired by Socrates:

“[L]a hauteur véritable et non apparente de l'ironie est [. . .] [d'être atteinte seulement si elle] est portée par la conséquence intrinsèque et absolue de l'infinie négativité.” (43)

[“Irony reaches a true and invisible peak . . . only when it is spurred by the intrinsic and absolute consequence of infinite negativity.”]

The ironical paradox of a love poem deconstructing love itself is yet another instance of Fisher's study of coexisting opposites and of the arising of a “no” guaranteeing separateness and poetical transparency. The lyric evolves from the absence of the cherished lady to her intentional dismissal and then to the ironical and fantasmatic erasure of the poem itself, as fully exemplified by the *tenso du non re* (Roubaud 40)—the debate about nothingness between two singers, Albertet and Aimeric, each reducing the other's answers to naught. The enigma is *fleshed out* as a genre in itself, stemming from Latin literature but taken up by the troubadours in the form of the *devinhal* (Roubaud 33). As often in Stevens, the answer to the riddle is purely “obscure” (409), if not negative, in “song[s] / That will not declare [themselves]” (15), “syllables that rise / From the floor, rising in speech we do not speak” (275).

But the song of the void goes further than that in Stevens, since it also verges on the Emersonian idea of a *tabula rasa*, in which the sloughs of stale concepts are abandoned for language to be revisited and explored afresh. Although obliterating the lady, the song strips itself of any ornament, seeking for a revelation between the “Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” (8), for a newfound integrity of speech. Harold Bloom thus reads Stevens *through* the philosopher's eye, placing along the same lines his interpretation of post-Emersonian precepts: “*It must be broken; It must not bear having been broken; It must seem to have been mended*” (1), on the one hand, and Stevens' recommendations, “*It Must Be Abstract,*” “*It Must Change,*” and “*It Must Give Pleasure,*” on the other. Shattering language and patching it up, losing one's voice to let others resound, abandoning the old, rediscovering the ancient, craving the new—these are the steps the poet is invited to take to find and refind his verse. If Stevens does not seem as obsessed with an original tongue as Pound, he is nevertheless endlessly animated by the art of the *trobar*, the word being an equivalent to the modern French *trouver* (to find) or *inventer*, a word meaning both

créer (to create something from scratch) and *découvrir* (to discover an already existing place, object, etc.; in French, one can therefore *invent* a cave or a wreck). Here are Stevens' words in "An Ordinary Evening in New Heaven":

To re-create, to use

The cold and earliness and bright origin
Is to search. Likewise to say of the evening star,
The most ancient light in the most ancient sky,

That it is wholly an inner light, that it shines
From the sleepy bosom of the real, re-creates,
Searches a possible for its possiblensness. (411)

As a linguistic and literary instance of this re-creation, the very word *romance* is continually changed in a series of anamorphoses resurrecting both the Roman language and the *roman*, in the medieval sense of a narrative piece, a genre epitomized by the allegorical *Roman de la Rose*, among other works. In "An Ordinary Evening in New Heaven," a poem that begins precisely with a desire for "The eye's plain version," for a "total leaflessness" (407), the persona oscillates between two alternate "romanzas" (410), reminding the reader of his plea for a "Re-Statement of Romance," written a few years after his quaint defense of monotony in "Romance for a Demoiselle Lying in the Grass." More than by any positive answer, the poet's search seems motivated by the mere pleasure of pronouncing ancient words, even if it means partially rewriting them, as indicated by the choice of a Renaissance spelling that, in "Cy Est Pourtraicte, Madame Ste Ursule, et Les Unze Mille Vierges" added the "c" in "pourtraicte" (Greimas 472) and changed the "i" of "cy" into a "y" (Greimas 106), with a view to tingeing the old French with hues of Latin and Greek.

When he confronts spellings, toys with anachronical or seemingly precious terms, Stevens opens up a space where his language can take a deep breath. In the in-between and ungraspable region of his verse, such as that analyzed in "Examples of Wallace Stevens," by R. P. Blackmur, lies the true exhalations of poetry. Stevens notes in the "Adagia":

gaiety
Poetry is the joy of language. (912)

He therefore parallels Dante's pneumatic conception of love and creation as a never-ending circulation: "Amor mi spira," Dante says ["Love breathes (in) me"] (cited by Agamben 207). Kristeva further shows how poetry is not *about* the joy of love, since the two partake of one and the same experience:

Le mélisme complexe, opulent, luxurieux, fait de sinuosités, d'incantations de plaisir, de vocalises expressives . . . sont en fait le premier codage du transport amoureux du chanteur, les marques de la joie ou du *joï*. Le terme est attesté sous deux formes, masculines et féminine, et dénote une jouissance, une force vitale, un élan embellissant et épurant, une "fête de l'être." (349)

[The complex, rich, luxurious melody, made of sinuosités, incantations for pleasure, expressive singing . . . are actually the first cipher of the singer's infatuation, the signs of his joy. There are two known forms of the word, a feminine and a masculine one, and it is equated with a pleasure, a vital force, an embellishing and purifying urge, a "celebration of being."]

Often, Old French or the *lingua d'Oc*—it might be useful to remind one that the opposition between the *langue d'oïl* of the North and the *langue d'oc* of Occitania refers to the two ways of saying "yes" in Old French—is the medium for this "joy which never ends" (Agamben quoting the troubadours 207). As if unconsciously resuscitating the medieval conceptions of the physiology of love, Stevens delights in the wind passing through the harmonium of his collections, making the chords of choirs and guitars vibrate in an ample gamut of "Vocalissim[i]" (77). He dotes on phonemic details such as the "Heavenly labials in a world of gutturals" (6), or the turning of "the land of the elm trees" into an exotic Mediterranean country: "They rolled their r's, there, in the land of the citrons" (415). The concepts of the dead root of Latin come back to life in a rapturous polyphony of Roman languages (among others) as the poet offers "To compound the imagination's Latin with / The lingua franca et jocundissima" (343).

Far from being a "ghost world," the Stevensian "tournamonde" (406) resuscitates the forgotten melodies of the troubadours and circulates amid the "fragments d'un discours amoureux" (to borrow from the title of Roland Barthes's book), enabling R. P. Blackmur to declare:

Wallace Stevens is a dandy and a Platonist, he darlings the syllables of his ideas: it is the stroke of platonism on prosody that produces Euphues, wit with a secret, ornament on beauty. You need an old dictionary and an old ear to get his beauty: as if he had to find an unfamiliar *name* before the beauty of his perception could emerge; and it is along these lines that you have to think of the French symbolists' influence upon him. They taught Eliot the anti-poetic and the conversational style; Stevens they taught the archaic and the rhetorical; that is, Eliot and Stevens saw the one prosody running in opposite directions. But Stevens is in essence of a very old tradition, French and Platonic, working on a modern substance. He is a troubadour, a poet of

the Court of Love, and his badge is *Trobar Clus*; he has a bias for the hermetic, for the complex and ornamented protection of complex and violent perception—which is his way of heroizing the sensibility. (436)

But the comparison appears even more interesting when read in another key. Indeed, what is paradoxically latent in Blackmur's finely wrought portrait is actually a reversal of Plato's theory of Ideas. By starring Stevens' poetry of erudite ornament and sensual pleasure, the critic draws the contours of the neoplatonic interpretation of artworks as a means of improving nature through the artist's touch. Far from being rejected to the nether end of the Republic as mere illusion, the imagination, the image, the ornament enable one to get closer to Truth. Precisely, Stevens keeps reasserting the interaction between the real and the imaginary through endless epiphanies and their myriad inflections. Platonic revelation is traded for poetic variation, just as the *donna angelicata*, the epitome of the Beautiful and the Good, gives way to prismatic reflections as soon as the troubadour love song is heard against the backdrop of a whole repertory of remoldings.

From the *via negativa* to the unfolding of multiple forms, from silence to choirs of rustling tongues, the whispering troubadour does not sing so much the desired and ideal lady as "the sound of the foreign." And as the erasure of the woman as a theme lets the plays of form break through, the interior paramour softly passes from the warfare of courteous love to the verbal alterity of the modernist canto.

Paris III, Sorbonne Nouvelle
Ecole Normale Supérieure
France

Notes

¹ Wallace Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 902. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with page number only in parentheses.

² Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the French are mine.

Works Cited

- Agamben, Giorgio. *Stanze, Parole et Fantasma Dans la Culture Occidentale*. Trans. Yves Hersant. Paris: Editions Bourgeois, 1981; Paris: Editions Payot et Rivage, 1998.
- Barthes, Roland. *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1977.
- Blackmur, R. P. "Examples of Wallace Stevens." 1931. *Language as Gesture: Essays in Poetry*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1954. 221–49.
- . "Lord Tennyson's Scissors: 1912–1950." 1951. *Language as Gesture: Essays in Poetry*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1954. 422–40.
- Bloom, Harold. *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Nature." *Essays and Lectures*. Ed. Joel Porte. New York: Library of America, 1983. 5–49.

- Estrin, Barbara. *The American Love Lyric After Auschwitz and Hiroshima*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.
- Fisher, Barbara M. *Wallace Steven: The Intensest Rendezvous*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1990.
- Greimas, Algirdas Julien. *Dictionnaire de l'Ancien Français*. Paris: Larousse, 1979; Larousse, 2004.
- Kehew, Robert, ed. *Lark in the Morning*. Poems trans. Ezra Pound, W. D. Snodgrass, and Robert Kehew. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Histoires d'Amour*. Paris: Editions Denoël, 1983; Folio, 2007.
- Pound, Ezra. *Personae: Collected Shorter Poems*. New York: Faber and Faber, 1990.
- . *A Walking Tour in Southern France: Ezra Pound among the Troubadours*. Ed. R. Sieburth. New York: New Directions, 1992.
- Quignart, Pascal. *Le Sexe et l'Effroi*. Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1994.
- Rieke, Alison. "Stevens' Armchair Travel: The Sound of the Foreign." *Wallace Stevens Journal* 15.2 (Fall 1991): 191–208.
- Roubaud, Jacques. *La Fleur Inverse: Essai Sur l'Art formel des Troubadours*. Paris: Editions Ramsay, 1986.
- Stevens, Wallace. *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson. New York: Library of America, 1997.
- Vendler, Helen. *Words Chosen Out of Desire*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1984.

Poetics of Variation: Wallace Stevens' and Paul Valéry's Poems of the Sea

LISA GOLDFARB

*Un poème à variantes, c'est un scandale pour l'opinion
ordinaire et vulgaire. Pour moi, c'est un mérite.
L'intelligence est définie par le nombre des variantes.¹*

—Paul Valéry

*The scholar, captious, told him what he could
Of there, where the truth was not the respect of one,
But always of many things.*

—“Someone Puts a Pineapple Together,”
Wallace Stevens

I

TO READ PAUL VALÉRY'S prose, as a Wallace Stevens scholar, is an exhilarating experience, for the subjects most dear to Valéry and to which he devotes the greatest attention—philosophy and poetry, poetic musicality, the relationship between reader and poet—often recall similar discussions in Stevens' sparer prose, and offer us a fuller theoretical language with which to grapple with Stevens' poems. When Valéry asserts that the philosopher is hampered by his search for “un système de solutions” [“a system of solutions”] (*Cahiers I* 487), we could be reading Stevens' words to Henry Church: “A philosopher is never at rest unless he is systematizing” (*L* 430). When Valéry writes about how the composition of his own masterpiece, “La Jeune Parque” [“The Young Fate”], began with the rhythm of his walking—“l'allure excitant les pensées, les pensées modifiant l'allure” [“the gait exciting the thoughts, the thoughts modifying the gait”] (*Oeuvres I* 1475), we are reminded of Stevens' words: “Walking helps me to concentrate and I suppose that, somehow or other, my own movement gets into the movement of the poems” (*L* 844). It seems that at almost every turn in Valéry's work, one meets with parallels in Stevens. The most suggestive of these, perhaps, is Valéry's discussion of our propensity to construct fictions in “Nécessité de la poésie” [“The Necessity of Poetry”]. These words of Valéry's might be Stevens' own, so well do they

complement Stevens' notion of our human need for a "supreme fiction": Valéry writes, "Nous vivons continuellement en production de fictions" ["We live continuously in the making of fictions"], and elaborates: "Nous ne vivons que de fictions, qui sont nos projets, nos espoirs, nos souvenirs, nos regrets, etc., et nous ne sommes qu'une invention perpétuelle" ["We only live fictions, which are our projects, our hopes, our memories, our regrets, etc., and we are only a perpetual invention"] (*Oeuvres I* 1387). It is when Valéry discusses the optimum way that we create such fictions—in poetry, where we negotiate the relation between "*ce qui est*" ["*what is*"] and "*ce qui n'est pas*" ["*what is not*"] (*Oeuvres I* 1387), where process not product is the aim—that we approach the deepest bond between these two great poets: their mutual grasp that we move toward a "supreme fiction" by variation.

One might call the concept and form of musical-poetic variation the meeting place of Valéry and Stevens. The concept comes into play when we consider the way they compare philosophy and poetry, in their many and evolving definitions of poetry, and as they consider questions of aesthetics. Surely, too, when we study the way Valéry and Stevens work with the musical analogy, poetic variation is central. As is the case with comparative studies of Valéry and Stevens generally, although both show a sustained interest in musical-poetic variations, Valéry theorizes at greater length, and Stevens practices with virtuosity what Valéry postulates. Valéry writes consistently and exhaustively about how his philosophic and poetic disposition leads him to envision musical-poetic variations as an ideal form, and his poetic variants certainly reflect his interest in variations. However, he rarely employs the form in the strictest sense of the term. By contrast, in his essays Stevens seldom puts the name of "variation" to the musical-poetic form that, as many critics have noted, is predominant in his poems.

Although scholars of each poet have long acknowledged Valéry's and Stevens' thinking about and practice of variations, none has undertaken the subject comparatively.² Yet, when we examine Stevens' definitions of poetry and his ideas about the poetic process through the lens of Valéryan theory, we not only shed light on the poets' theoretical likenesses, but also find a language that helps us to appreciate their deeper poetic affinity. Close study of their prose (essays, letters, notebooks) demonstrates a striking convergence of Valéry's and Stevens' thought about variations. Importantly, these ideas find expression in their poems, notably in Valéry's "Comme au bord de la mer" ["As on the Shore of the Sea"] and Stevens' "Sea Surface Full of Clouds."³ In these remarkable sea poems, both poets craft a variation form that elucidates what Valéry calls the "*possible-à-chaque-instant*" ["*possible-at-each-instant*"] (*Oeuvres I* 1467). In a succession of exquisite moments, both poets help us to understand Stevens' concept that "truth [is] not the respect of one, / But always of many things" (695).

II

Stevens rightly refers to Valéry in “The Effects of Analogy” as a poet who “pushes on and lives, or tries to live . . . on the verge of consciousness” (712), for Valéry aims to do exactly what Stevens indicates: to grasp fully the human imagination and to examine how we express the world about us and within us. In Valéry’s magnificent effort to study how we create and how we know—rationally, poetically, artistically, scientifically (all dimensions being inseparable for Valéry)—we find the wellspring of his understanding of variations.

It is hardly surprising, given the abstract nature of his endeavor, that Valéry devotes more pages to philosophy in his notebooks than to any discipline apart from poetry. Yet, much as his writings may confirm his fascination with the great subjects of philosophy—being, time, causality, creation—his criticisms of the discipline are everywhere evident. What Paul Gifford writes of Valéry’s idea of the mind in the *Cahiers* illuminates the poet’s critical stance toward philosophic systems. Gifford writes, “The mind in his view is authentic only in its rebounding, ever-renewed, always unfinished act; as achieved totality of understanding, it overreaches and falsifies itself” (38). Just as glaring as his suspicion of systems, however, is Valéry’s critique of the philosopher’s discursive language, which he maintains is falsely linear and rests upon shifting definitions of words. Yet, Valéry’s criticisms inspire his ideas about a poetic language that would give the poet the ability to delve into those very questions that he believes defy expression in the philosopher’s discursive language. Although in one notebook entry Valéry castigates the philosopher for concentrating his search on a “système de solutions” [“system of solutions”], in the next breath he contemplates an alternative philosophy that posits a “système de notations” [“system of notations”] (*Cahiers I* 487), one that would trace the movement and complexity of thought.

Valéry knits together his philosophical desire and his own aim to find that language when he writes: “Le plus beau serait de penser dans une forme qu’on aurait inventée” [“The most beautiful would be to think in a form that one would have invented”] (*Cahiers I* 501). Often the most moving accounts in Valéry’s notebooks are those in which his language becomes rhythmic and poetic, for in those entries he begins to develop the language that he theorizes. Consider the following passage, in which Valéry envisions a time when we will bind rational and irrational experience, and understand the moving and active nature of all knowledge. The notebook entry takes the form of a poem as Valéry imagines a variegated and sensuous poetic language:

Vers ce temps-là les hommes commencèrent de
comprendre
que la véritable connaissance est *création*

que la marque de la vérité est la réussite des actes
que l'instinct achève l'intelligence
que la création est vie
que le faire est le seul "savoir." (*Cahiers I* 579–80)

[Toward this time men will begin to understand
that true knowledge is *creation*
that the mark of the truth is the succession of acts
that instinct achieves intelligence
that creation is life
that doing is the only "knowing."]

If Valéry's notebooks show us the philosophic underpinning that engenders his interest in variations, his essays illustrate that this emergent form lies at the core of his understanding of the nature of poetic language. One segment of his essay, "Nécessité de la poésie" ["The Necessity of Poetry"], is particularly pertinent to our study of Stevens, both for the way Valéry discusses the fictions with which we compose our lives, and for the active way in which we compose them. Similar to Stevens' understanding of the relation between the imagination and reality (that imagination is reality, that we would not have access to reality but for the imagination), Valéry contends that "Nous ne vivons que de fictions" ["We live only in fictions"] (*Oeuvres I* 1387). More important even than their mutual understanding of our fictions, however, is the dynamic way that we create them. Of the relation between "*ce qui est*" ["*what is*"] and "*ce qui n'est pas*" ["*what is not*"], Valéry writes:

Remarquez bien (j'y insiste) que toutes ces fictions se rapportent nécessairement à *ce qui n'est pas*; et s'opposent non moins nécessairement à *ce qui est*; en outre, chose curieuse, c'est *ce qui est* qui engendre *ce qui n'est pas*, et c'est *ce qui n'est pas* qui répond constamment à *ce qui est*. . . . Vous êtes ici, et tout à l'heure n'y serez plus, et le savez. *Ce qui n'est pas* répond dans votre esprit à *ce qui est*. C'est que la puissance sur vous de *ce qui est*, produit la puissance en vous de *ce qui n'est pas*; et celle-ci se change en sensation d'impuissance au contact de *ce qui est*. Alors, nous nous révoltons contre le fait; nous ne pouvons pas admettre un fait comme la mort. Nos espoirs, nos rancunes, tous cela est une production immédiate, instantanée, du conflit de *ce qui est* avec *ce qui n'est pas*. (*Oeuvres I* 1387–88)

[Note well (I insist on it) that all these fictions necessarily bear a relation to *what is not*; and are opposed not less necessarily to *what is*; what is more, and a curious thing, that *what is*, is what engenders *what is not*, and *what is not* responds to *what is*. . . . You are here, and very soon, will not be, and you know it.

What is not responds in your mind to *what is*. It is the power that *what is* exerts on you, that produces the power in you of *what is not*; and the latter changes into the sensation of impossibility in the contact with *what is*. Now, we react against the fact; we are not able to admit a fact like death. Our hopes, our bitterness, all of this immediately proceeds, and is instantaneously produced, out of the conflict of *what is with what is not*.]

In the above passage, Valéry identifies a constant interplay between “*ce qui est*” (reality) and “*ce qui n’est pas*” (imagination) at the heart of our creative process: one stimulates the other in continuous motion, in a give and take that, in the end, produces the fictions that are deeply intertwined with our sense of ourselves. He uses a language that strikingly verges on the poetic. So frequent are his repetitions of “*ce qui est*” and “*ce qui n’est pas*” that we feel that what is imagined, “*ce qui n’est pas*” becomes almost indistinguishable from “*ce qui est*.”

The concept of multiplicity or variation, for Valéry, then, lies at the very heart of poetic language. In his essay “*Calepin du poète*” [“A Poet’s Notebook”], he considers poetic “ideas” as completely distinct from those for which we use discursive language. What we are not able to express in prose, we attempt to approach in poetry. Of these ideas, he writes, “*Ce sont ces idées qui ne sont possibles que dans un mouvement trop vif, ou rythmique, ou irréfléchi de la pensée*” [“It is these ideas that one senses or recognizes only in a too-quick, rhythmic, or unreflected movement of thought”] (*Oeuvres I* 1450). The principle of metaphor, by definition, for Valéry, presupposes a kind of variation: “*La métaphore, par exemple, marque dans son principe naïf, un tâtonnement, une hésitation entre plusieurs expressions d’une pensée*” [“Metaphor itself, for instance, in its simplest form marks a *groping*, a *searching*, a hesitation between several possible expressions of a thought”] (*Oeuvres I* 1450). Valéry extends this notion of metaphor and defines the objective of poetry in terms of variation: “*L’objet propre de la poésie est ce qui n’a pas un seul nom, ce qui en soi provoque et demande plus d’une expression*” [“The very object of poetry is what does not have only one name, is what by its very nature provokes and asks for more than one expression”] (*Oeuvres I* 1450).

Valéry discusses his own poetic temperament in his notebooks, and lingers intermittently on aspects of poetic variation. Although he does not set forth a sustained argument about the subject, in the succession of entries in which he ponders his temperament he begins to evolve a poetic theory with the concept of poetic variation at its center. Valéry’s preeminent concern for the process of thinking rather than for the product or result of his thought is the most consistent point that he makes about his own poetic and intellectual disposition. He writes in one entry, “*Une œuvre est pour moi l’objet possible d’un travail indéfini*” [“A work of art is for me one possible result of a work always in progress”] (*Cahiers I* 254). In another,

he distinguishes himself from those who conceive of “works,” and asserts his own preoccupation with the “act” of creation: “Tel, je ne conçois jamais d’œuvres. L’œuvre ne m’importe pas profondément. C’est le pouvoir de faire les œuvres qui m’intrigue, m’excite, me tourmente” [“As such, I never envision *works*. The work itself is not terribly significant to me. It is the power to make the work that intrigues me, excites me, torments me”] (*Cahiers I* 243). In still other entries, as he reflects on his own wish to generate as many possible shapes for an idea as he can conceive, Valéry writes, “Ce qui m’intéresse ce n’est pas une image mais toutes les images possibles” [“What interests me is not one image but all possible images”] (*Cahiers I* 254). One can certainly see here how Valéry’s interest in “toutes les images possibles” [“all possible images”] seems to anticipate Stevens’ description of the imagination as “the source not of a certain single value but of as many values as reside in the possibilities of things” (726).

In those essays, however, where Valéry reminisces about the composition of his own poetic masterpieces “La Jeune Parque” [“The Young Fate”] and “Le Cimetière marin” [“The Graveyard by the Sea”], we see him develop his ideas about musical-poetic variations most fully. In “Fragments des mémoires d’un poème” [“Fragments of the Memories of a Poem”], his memoir about “La Jeune Parque” [“The Young Fate”], Valéry ruminates on the gap between the established text, the received literature of which his poem is one example, and his own compositional relationship to the poem. As he does so, he provides insight into his notion of poetic variation. He sees the poem arising from his attempt to “substituer à l’illusion d’une détermination unique et imitatrice du réel, celle du possible-à-chaque-instant, qui me semble plus véritable” [“to substitute for the illusion of a single imitation of the real, that which expresses the *possible-at-each-instant*, which seems truer to me”] (*Oeuvres I* 1467). He then directly links this desire poetically to challenge fixity in poetry with his own practice of composing variant versions of his poems, a practice for which he recalls disapproval on the part of readers and critics. Interestingly, he uses the word “variations” to describe his variants, and thereby loosely associates his variant poems with the form of variations: “Il m’est arrivé de publier des textes différents de mêmes poèmes: il en fut même de contradictoires, et l’on n’a pas manqué de me critiquer à ce sujet. Mais personne ne m’a dit pourquoi j’aurais dû m’abstenir de ces variations” [“It just so happened that I have published different versions of the same poems: even contradictory versions, and there are those who have not hesitated to criticize me for it. But no one has been able to tell me why I should have refrained from these variations”] (*Oeuvres I* 1467).

As he reflects on the composition of “Le Cimetière marin” [“The Graveyard by the Sea”], Valéry again recalls the way critics have taken him to task for his own variations (or “variants”) but, this time, rather than confining his reflections to his own poetic temperament, he broadens his thoughts about his own practice to poetry more generally, and invites

other poets to develop variations. What is striking here is that Valéry's predilection for variants spurs him to imagine other poets who might take the poetics of variation further, that is, those who might compose poetic variations along a more explicit musical model. In the following passage, Valéry looks ahead almost prophetically to Stevens:

Ce reproche m'est peu intelligible, comme on peut s'y attendre, après ce que je viens d'exposer. Au contraire, je serais tenté (si je suivais mon sentiment) d'engager les poètes à produire, à la mode des musiciens, une diversité de variantes ou de solutions du même sujet. Rien ne me semblerait plus conforme à l'idée que j'aime à me faire d'un poète et de la poésie. (*Oeuvres* I 1501)

[This reproach was hardly intelligible to me, as you can expect after what I have just explained. On the contrary, I would be tempted (and I followed my sentiment) to engage poets to produce, after the manner of musicians, a diversity of variants or solutions to the same subject. Nothing would seem to me to be more consistent with the idea I love to have of the poet and of poetry.]

III

Given Stevens' masterful use of musical-poetic variations in so many of his greatest poems—"Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," "Six Significant Landscapes," "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," "The Man with the Blue Guitar," "Credences of Summer," "Variations on a Summer Day"—it is all the more remarkable that he does not refer to the form more directly and specifically in his prose. However, when he considers the relationship between philosophy and poetry, and works "to disclose definitions of poetry" (639) in his essays, Stevens recalls those very features of Valéry's theory that prompt his call to other modern poets to compose variations. Before we turn to Stevens' and Valéry's variation poems, then, let us first take a brief look at how Stevens' reflections about poetry echo Valéry's "poetics of variation."

Stevens, like Valéry, is often drawn to philosophy and to philosophers for their treatment of concerns that dovetail with his own. In the absence of a totalizing or overarching system of belief, both poets ask what we can perceive of the larger world about us. If what we can perceive is the universal flux, how do we come to terms with it and how do we define ourselves in relation to it? What is the relation between our rational and irrational ways of perceiving and knowing? A key question for both poets is how we create, in view of our ever-changing and ever-moving world. As Stevens addresses these questions, he, like Valéry, frequently discusses the overlapping of poetry and philosophy. In "The Figure of the Youth as

Virile Poet," he considers the nature of "truth," and examines the roles of the philosopher and the poet, referring to philosophy as the "official view of being" and poetry, the "unofficial view" (667). In "The Irrational Element in Poetry," as he discusses the difference between a subjective and an objective reality, he again probes the relationship between the two. Stevens' most expansive essay on the relation between poetry and philosophy, "A Collect of Philosophy," in part, treats what we call "poetic" in philosophy and philosophic in poetry, and it also addresses those subjects that both philosophers and poets share: the nature of perception and "the infinity of the world" being two on which he dwells at some length. Of the latter, Stevens writes, "A realization of the infinity of the world is equally a perception of philosophy and a typical metamorphosis of poetry" (856). However much the questions of philosophy and poetry might overlap, Stevens, like Valéry, is careful to distinguish between the philosopher and the poet, and, like Valéry, questions both the philosopher's language as well as his tendency to create closed or fixed systems. Although he borrows the language of the philosopher, in his use of the words "reality," "truth," "being," and employs the very same binaries to which Valéry objects—"official" and "unofficial," "reason" and "imagination"—Stevens, too, expresses a frustration with the philosopher's discursive language when he writes about "definition." Of his attempt to find precise enough language to distinguish sensitively between the two disciplines, Stevens writes: "To define philosophy and to define poetry are parts of the repertory of the mind. They are classic exercises. This could not be true if the definitions were adequate" (864). More marked, however, is the way Stevens objects to the fixity or closed nature of philosophic systems, and sees this tendency of philosophers to systematize as the aspect that most clearly separates the poet from the philosopher. In a 1954 letter to Robert Pack, Stevens takes exception to Pack's assessment that his "work does not really lead anywhere," and defends the "indefinite" aspect of his "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," by contrasting their nature with the philosopher's tendency to create systems (L 863). As he does so, he recalls Valéry's critique of philosophy. For Stevens, the philosopher's systematizing is distinct from the poet's creation: "Say what you will. But we are dealing with poetry, not with philosophy. The last thing in the world that I should want to do would be to formulate a system" (L 864). To the philosopher who "is never at rest unless he is systematizing" (L 430), Stevens counterpoints the poet who "constantly requires a new station" (864).⁴

It is in Stevens' reflections on the workings of poetic language and in his evolving definitions of poetry that he veers closest to Valéry's understanding of variations. In "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," he insists that poetry is born of a "precise equilibrium" in the way the poet balances "the relation between the imagination and reality" (647). The nature of poetry, he maintains, is "an interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals" (659). Poetry, he insists in "The Figure of the Youth

as Virile Poet," has no clear definition; rather, we probe what poetry is through "impressions, approximations" (669). That poetry seeks to find "truth" is clear, yet Stevens suggests that the truth that it seeks is not absolute. "[I]t may be said," he writes, "that poetic truth is an agreement with reality, brought about by the imagination of a man disposed to be strongly influenced by his imagination, which he believes, for a time, to be true" (676). Poetry consists, Stevens argues, not of fixed or clear discoveries, but of "exertions to find the truth" (747), which exist "for a time." He writes elsewhere that such "agreement[\"s\"]" and "exertions" offer us "a momentary existence on an exquisite plane" (786); in the succession of such moments, Stevens fulfills Valéry's wish for multiplicity in poetry, for "pas une image mais toutes les images possibles" ["not one image but all possible images"] (*Cahiers I* 254).

We can surely see the seeds of his variation poems when Stevens comments on his own cast of mind in his letters. To Samuel French Morse in 1949, he writes of his own temperament and his resistance to "fixity": "Some people always know exactly what they think. I am afraid that I am not one of those people. The same thing keeps active in my mind and rarely becomes fixed" (L 641). In a letter to Barbara Church, written about the same time, he seems to extend this openness to his understanding of poetry: "It is possible that pages of insight and of reconciliation, etc. are merely pages of description. The trouble is that poetry is so largely a matter of transformation. To describe a cup of tea without changing it and without concerning oneself with some extreme aspect of it is not at all the easy thing that it seems to be" (L 643). In the latter passage, as in so many of his poetic reflections and reminiscences, Stevens' language reflects his propensity to focus, as Valéry would have it, on "le pouvoir de faire les œuvres" ["the power to make works of art"] (*Cahiers I* 243) rather than on the product or "contemplation finale" ["final contemplation"] (*Oeuvres I* 1254).

Stevens intermittently expresses his penchant for the form of variations in comments on particular poetic sequences. In a letter of 1935, referring to the poems in *Ideas of Order*, he discusses the relationship between the poems and the title of the collection, and clearly differentiates between "philosophical" and "poetic" order. He writes, "Not every poem expresses a phase of order or an illustration of order: after all, the thing is not a thesis" (L 279). More significantly, his comments on the arrangement of the poems suggest that we read them as variations: "The arrangement is simply based on contrasts; there is nothing rigid about it" (L 279). Similarly, later in his life, in a letter to Henry Church, concerning "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens again points the way to variations. He suggests that, although the title implies "there can be such a thing as a supreme fiction," he comes quite close to identifying variations as the form of his masterpiece, for it is precisely Stevens' desire to express that "the essence of poetry is change" (L 430) that makes variations the form that so many of his poems take.

Stevens' miscellaneous notebooks and "Adagia" suggest, too, that when we approach his poems as variations we are most attuned to "the personality of the poet" (714), for many entries indicate his grasp of variation as the essence of poetry. "Poetry is a response to the daily necessity of getting the world right" (913), he writes in one adage. In another, "Poetry constantly requires a new relation" (914). In these, and in many others, Stevens insists, poetry consists of "interrelations," "interactions" (903). Poetry, he writes, like "Literature[",""] is based not on life but on propositions about life" (910). In another entry from the notebooks, we can hear Stevens poignantly echo Valéry's understanding of metaphor as "un tâtonnement" ["a groping, a searching"] (*Oeuvres I* 1450):

The degrees of metaphor
The absolute object slightly turned
Is a metaphor of the object. (921)

In poetic figures "slightly turned," Stevens sets forth the themes on which he "plays" many poetic variations. As he does so, he demonstrates what Valéry says of variations and what Valéry expresses as equally true of both poets: "L'intelligence est définie par le nombre des variantes" ["The intelligence is defined by the number of variants"] (*Cahiers I* 254).

IV

Valéry's "Comme au bord de la mer" and Stevens' "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" share many thematic and formal characteristics, the clearest being their common subject of the sea, which holds a special fascination for both poets. Readers of their work do not have to search far to discover fruitful parallels in their many beautiful meditative "sea" poems, for Valéry's Mediterranean seascape has an equally prominent place in his poems as do Florida and its waters for Stevens. Such sea poems are among their most celebrated, as Valéry's "Le Cimetière marin" and Stevens' "The Idea of Order at Key West" certainly demonstrate. However, "Comme au bord de la mer" (and "Mers," more broadly) and "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" are particularly intriguing poems for our present study. Composed within a few years of one another—Valéry's was first published in 1927, and Stevens' in 1924—both poems address similar themes (our human relationship to the sea; the relation between the mind and the senses; eternal recurrence) and show Valéry and Stevens experimenting with and developing the form of musical-poetic variations.

As we noted earlier, when Valéry uses the language of variations in relation to his own compositional process, he is referring most often to his practice of publishing variant versions of the same poem. However, in "Comme au bord de la mer" and its placement in "Mers," we find Valéry's evidence of his interest in both "variants" and "variations." Although most readers of Valéry's poetry are familiar with the definitive

Pléiade edition, structured in three stanzas of irregular, though mathematically suggestive lengths (45–9–5), a variant and more compressed version of the poem in two stanzas (30–8), published in the same year, shows that this poem represented for him what he wrote of all that he published: “un *état* d’une suite d’élaborations” [“one *stage* in a series or sequence of elaborations”] (*Cahiers I* 314).⁵ In both versions, Valéry forges a language that simultaneously approximates the rhythmic motion of the sea and probes our human relationship to its power. Any analysis of this poem, or of any Valéry poem, necessitates that we keep in mind Valéry’s understanding of the multiple shapes a poem might always take. Even if we take the Pléiade edition as our model, and set aside its variant, which for the purposes of this essay we will do, Valéry’s poem certainly demonstrates his wish to ponder our human relationship to the sea in an active, open-ended way. “Comme au bord de la mer” follows a three-part sequence that focuses more on movement than on resolution. The poem’s opening lines simulate the recurrent movement of the waves and, as the long stanza progresses, Valéry presents the speaker who, in the first person, reflects on his position amid the waves. I provide here the poem’s opening lines and an overview of its movement stanza by stanza to give readers a sense of the way that Valéry conveys the sea’s continuous movement in the poem’s careful rhythms:

Comme au bord de la mer
 Sur le front de séparation,
 Sur la frontière pendulaire
 Le temps donne et retire,
 Assène, étale,
 Vomit, ravale,
 Livre et regrette,
 Touche, tombe, baise et gémit. . . . (*Oeuvres II* 668)

[As on the shore of the ocean
 On the front of separation,
 On the pendulous frontier of motion
 Time gives, takes back,
 Strikes, deploys,
 Vomits, gulps back,
 Gives and regrets,
 Fingers, falls, kisses and moans. . . .]
 (*Selected Writings* 80)

In lines that fluctuate from between five to eight syllables, Valéry opens the poem with rhythms that approximate the waves, which advance and retreat. Rich internal and end rhymes (sometimes full and sometimes near-rhymes) punctuate the poem and echo the word “mer” throughout—

“frontière,” “pendulaire,” “retire.” Important, too, to Valéry’s attention to movement over fixity, twelve verbs in five lines that describe time convey a sense of the unrelenting movement of the sea. When, a few lines later in the same stanza, Valéry situates his first-person speaker in relation to the sea, he does so by positioning him in motion as well. The speaker exclaims:

Sur le front battu de la mer
Je m’abîme dans l’intervalle de deux lames . . .⁶
(*Oeuvres II* 668)

[I plunge into the interval of two waves.—]
(*Selected Writings* 80)

Valéry uses a language that suggests that the sea’s movement hardly relents for a moment. The speaker entrenches himself merely in “the interval” between two waves. Ellipses, which Valéry often employs to the same purpose in other poems as well, indicate that the waves will continue to swell. In the second and third stanzas, Valéry then alternately presents the sea’s voice, “La voix massive de la mer” [“The voice of the ocean”] (*Oeuvres II* 669; *Selected Writings* 81), and the first-person human voice as it meets the waters, “Je me livre comme une vague” [“I give myself like a wave”] (*Oeuvres II* 669; *Selected Writings* 81). Finally, at the poem’s end, Valéry does not signal any finite resolution in the relation between the speaker and the sea nor any respite from the motion of either; rather, the gentle rocking rhythm of the poem’s closing lines indicates an ongoing motion.

Plus que seul au bord de la mer,
Je me livre comme une vague
À la transmutation monotone

De l’eau en eau
Et de moi en moi. (*Oeuvres II* 669)

[More than alone on the shore of the ocean,
I give myself like a wave
To the monotonous transmutation

Of water into water,
Myself into myself . . .] (*Selected Writings* 81)

Importantly, “Comme au bord de la mer” is pertinent to Valéry’s thinking about variations in more ways than his variant compositions or structural analyses of the lyric suggest. Unlike most of Valéry’s verse, it was

published as part of the longer sequence entitled “Mers” [“Seas”], a series of prose meditations on the sea, each of which sets forth a number of observations of the physical presence of the sea and the speaker’s encounter with it. The lyric, then, does not stand alone; rather, Valéry folds the lyric into this sequence and creates a kind of variation structure in their succession. He establishes a rhythm in these meditations, as he presents images and ideas that recur, and as he gently alternates a more omniscient observational perspective with a first-person voice. Themes that he takes up in the prose pieces reappear in the poem, as do particular sounds and phrasings.

In the first meditation, for example, as Valéry depicts the effect of the wind on the texture of the waves, he refers to their “transformation incessante” [“incessant transformation”] (*Oeuvres II* 663); in the predominant version of the lyric we meet their “transmutation monotone” [“monotonous transmutation”] (*Oeuvres II* 669); in the variant version of the lyric, their “transformation monotone” [“monotonous transformation”] (*Oeuvres II* 1427). In the second meditation, he speaks of the struggle between the mind and senses. Although the mind “abhorre le retour innombrable” [“abhors the eternal return”] (*Oeuvres II* 663), the senses are stimulated by it. The lyric, in turn, shows us how the speaker, as he listens to the sea’s repetitive sounds, directs us, too, to yield thought to sense: “Entends indéfiniment, écoute / Le chant de l’attente et le choc du temps” [“Listen endlessly, hear / The song of waiting and the shock of time”] (*Oeuvres II* 669; *Selected Writings* 81). In the third meditation, Valéry presents the “Coucher du soleil” [“Sunset”] (*Oeuvres II* 664) over the water, and the speaker reflects on the sense of our human weakness when we encounter the tremendous power of the sea and sky. Once again, we find this struggle in the lyric poem in the way Valéry juxtaposes the “voix massive de la mer” [“the voice of the ocean”] with the fainter first-person voice, which can only submit to the “transmutation monotone” [“monotonous transmutation”] (*Oeuvres II* 669). The seventh meditation, “Nage” [“Swim”] is particularly striking as we look to Stevens’ “Sea Surface Full of Clouds,” for in this section, Valéry’s speaker envisions the relationship between the human presence and the sea as an act of love. When he exclaims, “Je comprends à l’extrême ce que l’amour pourrait être” [“I understand absolutely what love could be”] (*Oeuvres II* 667), he seems to call forth not only the relationship between self and sea suggested at the close of “Comme au bord de la mer” but also Stevens’ coupling of sea and sky in “fresh transfigurations of freshest blue” (85) at the close of “Sea Surface Full of Clouds.”

Valéry situates his lyric as the ninth of ten such meditations in “Mers” and thus encourages us to read it, not as a definitive statement (not a “contemplation finale”) (*Oeuvres I* 1254), but as the culmination of successive, developing meditations. He writes of the sequence of meditations, including the lyric: “Il ne faut pas fixer ces créations tout individuelles. J’ai fixé celle-ci et quelques autres pour me servir de documents” [“One must not

fix these completely individual creations. I fixed this one here and a few others simply to serve as documents”] (*Oeuvres II* 668). “Comme au bord de la mer,” then, like the larger series of meditations that comprises “Mers,” demonstrates Valéry’s poetic experimentation with the concept of variations. In the way he blends poetic prose and lyric poetry, the sequence offers us an unusual example of just how far this advocate of “poésie pure” [“pure poetry”] was willing to go to ponder and stretch poetic form.

“Sea Surface Full of Clouds” is not the first “sea” poem we meet in *Harmonium* nor the first in which Stevens employs the form of variations. Florida poems are among the most memorable of this early collection, as are two of his most celebrated variation poems, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” and “Six Significant Landscapes.” “Sea Surface Full of Clouds,” however, is the poem in which Stevens successfully combines the sensual aspects that characterize the Florida poems with the formal innovations that become such a distinctive mark of his style. Both in the poem’s larger design (as a sequence of five cantos, each a variation of the one before) and in its musically resonant language, Stevens brings to life what Valéry calls “transformation incessante” [“incessant transformation”] (*Oeuvres II* 663), and what Stevens himself refers to as the “fluctuations” (792) of poetry, to present the sea, sky, and mind in all their motion.

In contrast to Valéry’s speaker in “Comme au bord de la mer,” who speaks from the sea’s edge and within its continuous waves, Stevens’ speaker intones from the deck of a ship and watches a sea whose movement “grew still.” One might see this poem as an elaborate play on the word “still,” for in its five cantos, Stevens seems to measure an apparent suspension of movement with ongoing motion. The first is the template along which Stevens models each successive canto:

In that November off Tehuantepec,
The slopping of the sea grew still one night
And in the morning summer hued the deck

And made one think of rosy chocolate
And gilt umbrellas. Paradisal green
Gave suavity to the perplexed machine

Of ocean, which like limpid water lay.
Who, then, in that ambrosial latitude
Out of the light evolved the moving blooms,

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

The sea-clouds whitened far below the calm

And moved, as blooms move, in the swimming green
And in its watery radiance, while the hue

Of heaven in an antique reflection rolled
Round those flotillas. And sometimes the sea
Poured brilliant iris on the glistening blue. (82–83)

Stevens situates the reader firmly in place and time: “In that November off Tehuantepec.” Although the position of the speaker—on a ship’s deck—indicates movement, words descriptive of the sea convey quiet and calm; unlike Valéry’s waves which advance and retreat, Stevens describes the sea as moving in place—“slopping.” The “ocean,” Stevens continues in stanza three, “like limpid water lay.” Similarly, in the fourth stanza, the speaker refers to “that Pacific calm,” and conveys a sense of a quiet body of water. Present participles and adjectival phrases—“Diffusing,” “swimming green,” “glistening blue”—also contribute to a sense of suspended or arrested movement. Stevens creates this scene out of a restricted network of words: “sea,” “calm,” “Bloom,” “green,” “hue” are just a few of the words that we hear at least twice. The lines, too, are rich in internal rhyme and assonance, with long “u” sounds (“grew,” “hued,” “latitude,” “hued,” “Who,” “moved,” “bloom”) echoing one another from stanza to stanza. At the same time that such repetitions and echoing sounds serve to create a sense of the sea’s stillness, however, Stevens suggests—in the gradually elongating long round sounds, particularly in the second half of the poem, that become more numerous and insistent (“Who,” “sea-blooms,” “Diffusing,” “bijou,” “moved,” “blooms move,” “hue,” “blue”)—that, while the sea is “calm,” it is a calm that is “still” moving. Even in this first canto of “Sea Surface Full of Clouds,” Stevens plays stasis against movement and modulates the sounds of his language. In doing so, he seems to animate exactly what Valéry describes in the first meditation of “Mers,” when he refers to the sea as “une figure solide cristalline en transformation incessante” [“a solid crystalline face in incessant transformation”] (*Oeuvres II* 663).

Stevens advances the stanzas in this first canto in a highly patterned manner and depicts the interaction between the mind and senses, of which Valéry, too, writes in “Mers.” The stanzas proceed by “twos” and trace the movement from sense to thought, and ultimately the interaction between the two in our grasp of sea and sky. In the first two stanzas, Stevens presents the scene before the speaker—the nightly movement of the water (“The slopping of the sea”) and the light that splashes on the deck come morning (“And in the morning summer hued the deck”)—and then Stevens shifts our attention to how the scene shapes the onlooker’s thought (“And made one think of rosy chocolate / And gilt umbrellas”). As if to stress the inadequacy of thought alone to meet the beauty of the scene, Stevens, in stanzas three and four, gently shifts the tone of the poem and questions the source of such beauty:

Who, then, in that ambrosial latitude
Out of the light evolved the moving blooms,

Who, then, evolved the sea-blooms from the clouds
Diffusing balm in that Pacific calm? (83)

Stevens emphasizes the primary question of the scene's authorship, hinting, perhaps, at divine origins in these stanzas, and underscores the centrality of the questions by placing the "Who" centrally in the canto. The repetition of "who" that so breathes through this stanza, and throughout the poem, underscores the importance of the questions and also, perhaps more importantly, creates in sound the effect of waves that the speaker contemplates. Most stunning for our study of Stevens' relationship to France, is that Stevens answers these questions in italicized French—"C'était mon enfant, mon bijou, mon âme"—as though gesturing to the authors of pure poetry in the very texture of the poem. Finally, in the last two stanzas, Stevens shows us poetically what he and Valéry both express in theory. Just as the mind is not sufficient to take in the external scene, neither is the imagination: "Poetry is not the same thing as the imagination taken alone. Nothing is itself taken alone. Things are because of interrelations or interactions" (903). In language replete with repeated words and sounds from the preceding stanzas and within the lines themselves, the speaker shows that when we grasp the essential unity of thought and sense, we perceive the sensuous bounty of the natural world and our place in it. Stevens' insistent repetitions of long vowel sounds and "r's" beg the reader to bask in this sensory richness—"as blooms move, in the swimming green / And in its watery radiance."

There is no better description of the structure of "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" than that it is a poetic rendering of musical variations, written much in the manner that Valéry had wished "d'engager les poètes à produire, à la mode des musiciens, une diversité de variantes ou de solutions du même sujet" ["to engage poets to produce, in the manner of musicians, a diversity of variants or solutions to the same subject"] (*Oeuvres I* 1501). Musical variations consist of the presentation of the same theme "several times over, but each time somewhat modified, melodically, rhythmically or harmonically" (Károlyi 106). Stevens contemplates our human relationship to sea and sky by following precisely such a pattern in each of the four remaining cantos. He situates the speaker in the same time and place by repeating line one ("In that November off Tehuantepec"), and then follows the two-by-two pattern we have just discussed. Stevens thus guides us from sensory observation to thought, from thought to an intense questioning, and ultimately to the blending of thought and sensory perception of sky and sea in each successive canto. One variation of the pattern follows another, much as one wave follows another on the surface of the sea.

As in musical variations, Stevens both repeats the overall pattern (or melody as in music) and alters it with each successive articulation. Similar phrasings and images recur from canto to canto, yet in the particular way he modifies them, he gently persuades the reader to yield thought to sense. A few examples suffice to demonstrate Stevens' mode of persuasion through repetition and variation. In the first two stanzas of each canto, the scene inspires the speaker's thoughts of "chocolate" and "umbrellas." In the first canto, the morning light generates thoughts of "rosy chocolate"; in the second, "chop-house chocolate"; the next, "porcelain chocolate"; and, in the fourth and fifth, "musky chocolate" and "Chinese chocolate." We observe a similar procession of "motley" images of umbrellas: "gilt umbrellas" (I); "sham umbrellas" (II); "pied umbrellas" (III); "frail umbrellas" (IV); "large umbrellas" (V). What "chocolate" and "umbrellas" have to do with the sea and the light that plays upon the waters is purely subjective and associational, Stevens suggests. However, if we take musical variation as the model for the poem here, we can see that Stevens modifies the words to shift subtly the meaning or "philosophical effects" (Gerber 181) in the poem.⁷

It is important to note, however, that Stevens varies not only the images of the poem that comprise the seascape itself—the morning light, the greens and blues that characterize the great "machine of ocean" and its crowning "heaven"—but also subtle changes in phrasing and rhythm that drive the poem forward, indicating that this apparently "still" scene is the site of larger transformations. Crucially, it is only when the reader yields thought to sense—that is, only when we are attentive to and feel Stevens' sonic and rhythmic changes—that we can grasp how he ponders the sea. Consider, for example, the way he varies line two—"The slopping of the sea grew still one night"—in the movement from canto to canto. Although in the first three, the line remains the same, in the penultimate canto, Stevens reverses their order and shifts the rhythm of the line: "The night-long slopping of the sea grew still." However, canto IV only signals the change that we will feel more fully in canto V when Stevens effectively transfers agency from the sea to the night. Here, it is no longer the sea that "grew still," but the night that claims dominion: "Night stilled the slopping of the sea." Alterations such as these propel the poem, and as they accumulate both small and large variations in tone and phrasing ultimately lead us to the poem's climactic lines. In language that recalls Valéry's "transformations" and "transmutation," Stevens' "still" sea and sky move with equal agency, and we witness, in the final tercet of the poem, their coupling.

Then the sea
And heaven rolled as one and from the two
Came fresh transfigurings of freshest blue. (85)

When we study Valéry's "Comme au bord de la mer" and Stevens' "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" side by side, their differences might at first forbid comparison between them, so strongly does Stevens' playful tone contrast with Valéry's meditative mood. However, like Valéry's speaker in "Comme au bord de la mer," Stevens' speaker watches the waters in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" ("the slopping of the sea" and "the machine of ocean"), contemplates ways that we perceive its motion in thought and feeling, and sensuously questions the natural or divine power that animates the sea. However many their common themes, the most important link between these poems is a formal one: Valéry's and Stevens' mutual attention to and development of the form of variations. In "Comme au bord de la mer" and, by extension, "Mers," we see Valéry experimenting with a variation form that Stevens perfects in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," one that would have undoubtedly pleased his French contemporary.

Gallatin School, New York University

Notes

¹["A poem with variants is a scandal for ordinary and vulgar opinion. For me, it is a merit. The intelligence is defined by the number of variants"] (*Cahiers I* 254). Translations of Valéry's prose are my own. For a translation of "Comme au bord de la mer," I have relied on Louise Varèse's translation in *Selected Writings of Paul Valéry*. Unless otherwise noted, quotations from Stevens are from *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, and are cited in the text with page number only in parentheses.

²For studies of Valéry's practice of producing "variants," and his compositional process in general, see Brian Stimpson's *Paul Valéry and Music*. James Lawler's *The Poet as Analyst: Essays on Paul Valéry* is invaluable for insightful analyses of particular poems that take this practice into consideration. There is a wealth of critical literature on Stevens' individual variation poems. For a broad discussion of the form of variations, see Northrop Frye's "Wallace Stevens and the Variation Form." Barbara Holmes, too, treats the subject of variations at some length in *The Decomposer's Art: Ideas of Music in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, and Anca Rosu's treatment of the related subject of repetition in *The Metaphysics of Sound in Wallace Stevens* is important as well for thinking about variations in relation to the larger subject of Stevens and sound and music.

³Varèse translates the title as "On the Shore of the Ocean." When I refer to the title in this essay, I have preserved the literal translation of the French "mer" into "sea" to underline the parallel with Stevens' "Sea Surface Full of Clouds."

Please note, too, that "Comme au bord de la mer" and the sequence "Mers" belong to Valéry's larger collection entitled "Autres Rhumbs." Given the focus of this essay on the subject of the sea and the form of variations, Valéry's introductory words to the first collection, "Rhumbs," are worth our notice. A "rhumb," Valéry remarks, is a "nom marin" ["marine term"] that indicates the points of a mariner's compass. He associates this with the form of his own collection and uses the word "variations" in conjunction with this collection "d'impressions et d'idées" ["of impressions and ideas"]: "Comme l'aiguille de compas demeure assez constante, tandis que la route varie, ainsi peut-on regarder les caprices ou bien les applications successives de notre pensée, les variations de notre attention, les incidents de la vie mentale, les divertissements de notre mémoire, la diversité de nos désirs, de nos émotions et de nos impulsions—" ["Just as the needle of a compass stays fairly constant while the route varies, so one can look at

the vagaries or the successive applications of our thought, the variations of our attention, the incidents of our mental life, the distractions of our memory, the diversity of our desires, of our emotions, and of our impulses—”] (*Oeuvres II* 597).

⁴ Rosu writes that Stevens’ poetry engages in “a special kind of rivalry with philosophy” (138). I discuss this rivalry in relation to Valéry more fully in my essay “Philosophical Parallels: Wallace Stevens and Paul Valéry.”

⁵ It is interesting to note that in her translation of “Comme au bord de la mer,” Varèse does not adhere strictly to either variant of the poem, but draws on both to render its sense and mood. To create a tighter structure, Varèse breaks down Valéry’s long stanzas into shorter units and translates the poem into six stanzas of varying lengths.

⁶ Varèse collapses these two lines into one. For the sake of precision, I will translate both lines here:

On the battered front of the sea
I plunge into the interval of two waves.—

⁷ Natalie Gerber presents a thoughtful analysis of “Sea Surface Full of Clouds,” in her essay, “Stevens’ Prosody: Meaningful Rhythms.” She convincingly demonstrates “how the impressionistic changes in perception rightly celebrated in this poem are inextricably connected to changes in the quality of linguistic rhythm” (179).

Works Cited

- Frye, Northrop. “Wallace Stevens and the Variation Form.” *Literary Theory and Structure: Essays in Honor of William K. Wimsatt*. Ed. Frank Brady, John Palmer and Martin Price. New Haven: Yale UP, 1973. 395–414.
- Gerber, Natalie. “Stevens Prosody: Meaningful Rhythms” *Wallace Stevens Journal* 29.1 (Spring 2005): 178–87.
- Gifford, Paul. “Thinking-writing Games of the *Cahiers*.” *Reading Paul Valéry: Universe in Mind*. Ed. Paul Gifford and Brian Stimpson. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998. 36–52.
- Goldfarb, Lisa. “Philosophical Parallels: Wallace Stevens and Paul Valéry.” *Wallace Stevens Journal* 29.1 (Spring 2005): 163–70.
- Holmes, Barbara. *The Decomposer’s Art: Ideas of Music in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*. New York: Peter Lang, 1990.
- Károlyi, Ottó. *Introducing Music*. Norfolk, U.K.: Penguin Books, 1965.
- Lawler, James. *The Poet as Analyst: Essays on Paul Valéry*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1974.
- Rosu, Anca. *The Metaphysics of Sound in Wallace Stevens*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1995.
- Stevens, Wallace. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*. 1966. Ed. Holly Stevens. Berkeley: U of California P, 1996.
- . *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson. New York: Library of America, 1997.
- Stimpson, Brian. *Paul Valéry and Music: A Study of the Techniques of Composition in Valéry’s Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984.
- Valéry, Paul. *Cahiers I*. Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, 1973.
- . “Comme au bord de la mer.” *Selected Writings of Paul Valéry*. 1950. Trans. Louise Varèse. New York: New Directions, 1964. 80–81.
- . *Oeuvres I*. Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, 1957.
- . *Oeuvres II*. Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, 1960.

"Chez moi":
Stevens at Home in the French Language

JULIETTE UTARD

HOME" IS A TERM that permeates the language of academic discourse. To *arrive* at a conclusion, to drive one's point *home*, to *dwell* on a subject, even to *focus*—a verb that shares its Latin root with the French *foyer*, meaning a household—are phrases that carry along with them the expectation of a return home, the reaching of a familiar place where one can lay down one's thoughts and rest at last. Although Wallace Stevens challenged the ability of such a metaphor to define intellectual experience, he did find it suitable to describe poetic experience: "We never arrive intellectually. But emotionally we arrive constantly (as in poetry, happiness, high mountains, vistas)."¹ One may want to add the French language to these illustrations of a coveted destination. French became for Stevens a way to arrive emotionally, a kind of shortcut to "happiness, high mountains, vistas," fulfilling a desire for "abstraction," "change," and "pleasure" and, possibly, tracing a straighter route "toward a supreme fiction" (329–52). Stevens' relationship to French seems to have had much to do with his desire to keep "arriving emotionally" in language.

Most troubling in the letters and essays is Stevens' repeated reference to French *not* as a foreign language but rather as a natural, familiar, even family-like language. France was a home in which to dwell, if not literally, at least poetically—as in the lines by Friedrich Hölderlin, which Martin Heidegger amply commented on.² French was indeed the language in which Stevens named his home, be it the literal home at Westerly Terrace described as "chez moi" on a Christmas card (see fig. 1), or the historical home of his ancestors, also described as "the original chez moi" (L 728), or even the poet's literary home in language, of which he wrote: "It is only au pays de la métaphore / Qu'on est poète" (920). But Stevens' re-familiarization of French is nowhere as forcibly enacted as in the following aphorism: "French and English constitute a single language" (914).

No doubt, one is tempted to consider this statement about a "single" tongue as simply *tongue-in-cheek*, to regard it as yet another of Stevens' playful provocations. Stevens did, however, persist in his declaration, which he articulated in two letters to Bernard Heringman, the first of which is dated November 21, 1950: "A good many words come to me from

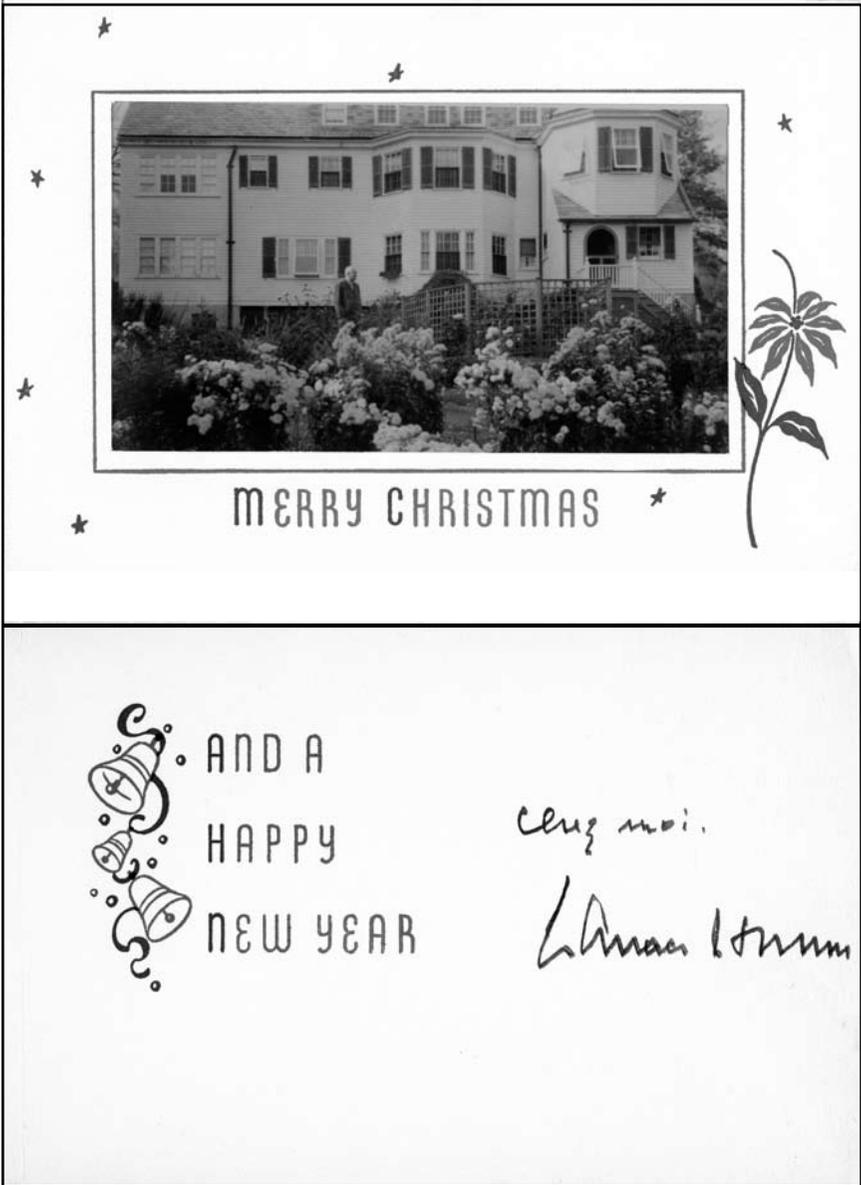


Fig. 1. Christmas card sent to Wilson Taylor, postmarked December 21, 1951. Reproduced by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

French origins. I think we have a special relation to French and even that it can be said that English and French are a single language" (L 699). Stevens' tone here is conjectural as he narrows down the scope of his aphorism to a "special relation" between the two languages, whereby we understand that not all languages are one language, but only French and English.

There are slight changes in his 1953 letter, however, that seem indicative of a shift toward a more literary and less literal meaning:

I still think that English and French are the same language, not etymologically nor at sea level. But at sea level it is not possible to communicate with many people who speak English in English. You have to take my statement as applying only in the areas in which it would in fact apply. What a great many people fail to see is that one uses French for the pleasure that it gives. (L 792)

Stevens drops all previous reservations in favor of a more assertive mode, but he also discards the previous interpretation. Although the first letter presents the adage as both personally and historically valid (“come to me from French origins”), the second letter denies it both a diachronic and a synchronic validity (“not etymologically nor at sea level”). Pleasure seems to be the only validation. In other words, Stevens’ English needs French to eroticize and poeticize it.

Although most practitioners of French and English ponder over their differences, Stevens explores their common ground. His aphorism summons the image of a bifid tongue, a split tongue both one and the other, the two of them made inseparable, which, needless to say, is a figure of temptation—“This is where the serpent lives” (355), Stevens writes at the beginning of “The Auroras of Autumn.” Stevens’ aphorism reverses the Babelian gesture of a separation into a multitude of tongues, a gesture often interpreted as a malediction or, etymologically, as the curse of “bad diction” (*maudire*, to curse, is derived from *mal dire*, to speak badly), a curse echoed in Stéphane Mallarmé’s reflection on poetry, “Les langues imparfaites en cela que plusieurs” (244), but which, following Paul Ricoeur’s argument in his essay on translation, could be re-interpreted as the motive for good diction and the founding of the literary impetus.

The belief in a “special relation” between French and English seemed rather self-evident to Henry James, who apparently knew, as early as 1904, that French and English were one language. In the opening pages of *The Golden Bowl*, James’s Italian prince, about to marry an American woman in London, stands at the crossroads of many languages and offers the following comment on French and English:

Miss Verver had told him he spoke English too well—it was his only fault, and he hadn’t been able to speak worse even to oblige her. “When I speak worse, you see, I speak French,” he had said. (45)

Although being Italian, James’s protagonist passes for an Englishman, which in itself is morally questionable (“it was his only fault”). From this we understand that bilingualism is a form of duplicity: the prince will, of

course, be guilty of betrayal, symbolized as the flawed “golden bowl.” In James’s words, French appears as merely a lesser kind of English, morally tainted to be sure, within a larger continuum called “English.” If to speak bad English is to speak French, then there is a difference of degree, not of nature, between the two. James’s version of a common language is highly hierarchical: one may speak well (in British English) or better (in American English, which, as the novel strongly implies, is the language of the Ververs and of “verve”), or one may speak worse (French), or worse yet (Italian, a language consistently associated with adultery in the novel). As the phrase “pardon my French” suggests—which, according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, began to circulate at the turn of the 20th century, when James was writing—French, in English, is a language that calls for an apology.

Stevens’ aphorism suggests a radically different way of looking at languages. Like James’s remark, it collapses the accepted boundaries between English (Stevens’ maternal tongue, the language of his home and homeland, the language in which he wrote and in which this particular aphorism was written) and French (the language of the country he longed to visit, the language of longing and desire, of that which he consistently refused to indulge in, except in words). But unlike James, Stevens merged French and English into one, deliberately creating lines of confusion and diffusion within a new language of (untainted) desire. There is no such thing as a bilingualism anymore, merely a larger kind of monolingualism, one hospitable language large enough to host several kinds, which recalls Ricoeur’s notion of “Hospitalité langagière” [“linguistic hospitality”] (20). A larger kind of monolingualism is precisely what Jacques Derrida describes, in the context of post-colonial Francophone studies, in *Monolingualism of the Other*. In the book, Derrida explores the link between language and ownership, and he attempts to define what it means to own or master a language, to find one’s own language. His initial statement reads thus: “I only have one language; it is not mine” (1). The metaphor Derrida summons on the threshold of his book is that of a coil of languages, a metaphor he borrows from the book *Amour bilingue* [*Bilingual Love*], by his friend Abdelkebir Khatibi, and which he uses as one of the epigraphs to his own book: “There, a birth to language, through a labyrinthine maze of names and identities coiling up, one around the other: a nostalgic ring of the unique.” French and English could very well be described as forming, in Stevens’ work, “a nostalgic ring of the unique.”

Derrida evokes the incongruity of having one language at one’s disposal without ever being able to own it, or to claim it as one’s own, because it is always experienced as emanating from another. This initial paradox echoes a line by Stevens in his late poem “Madame La Fleurie”: “It was a language he spoke, because he must, yet did not know” (431), which, in Derridean terms, can be paraphrased as, “English is a language I must speak (as I have no other), yet I do not know it.” Conversely, French for Stevens (the French used in the poem’s title, for instance) was a language

he knew, because he wanted to, yet did not speak. The “wicked” (432) mother staged in the poem, who buries her child in the earth and devours his “crisp knowledge,” may be taken to signify the mother tongue, a tongue not “chosen out of their desire” (378) but rather one unwittingly submitted to, which buries one’s meaning in commonplace. In light of this, it is possible to see Stevens’ English as a language once familiar now become strange, a language dis-owned, as Stevens himself suggested when he added in his letter: “It is not possible to communicate with many people who speak English in English.”

Stevens’ English was a language beyond the maternal tongue, in excess of it, constantly pointing toward other languages and needing others. His “absolute habitat” (Derrida 1) was, therefore, a compound of languages, as is suggested in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” where the poet

tries by a peculiar speech to speak

The peculiar potency of the general,
To compound the imagination’s Latin with
The lingua franca et jocundissima. (343)

Although Stevens was monolingual, consistently opting for English in his writings and letters, he knew several other languages, which informed both his vocabulary and syntax. He was, therefore, a monolingual poet inhabiting a *lingua franca*, a poet whose habitat was a mixed language. The *lingua franca*, a compound of Dutch, Latin, and Italian, must have reminded Stevens of his European ancestors, whom he described as bilingual: “All of them were bi-lingual and came from a region that may be described as bi-lingual. Deux Pontes, for instance, is much better known as Zwei Brügge” (L 466). This multilingual habitat was like a “parental space” (374) recovered through the writing of poetry.

But *franca* is also the Latin root for French. As early as the 10th century, a false etymology suggested that the name “French” was derived from *franca*, meaning “free,” although in fact it was the other way around: *frank* came to mean *free* because of a weapon named *franca* that enabled the Franks to free themselves. On account of this etymology, *frank* and, later, French retained the semantics of freedom to the point where it has now become a cliché to refer to anything unrestricted and, gradually, licentious, as being French. That one may be freer in an adopted language than in one’s mother tongue seemed only natural for Stevens, as we can see in the following remark: “I think that Mr. Church was freer in French than otherwise, as it was natural for him to be after a life-time in France” (L 558).

Stevens’ linguistic compound was also a way of reaching for an “Obscurest parent, obscurest patriarch” (440), a groping toward kinship that ran parallel to his genealogical search and gave birth to all his strange *family* (rather than familiar) metaphors: “the mother of beauty” (55); “Not

father, but bare brother, megalfrere" (267); "The furiously burning father-fire" (317); "There sleep the brother is the father, too, / And peace is cousin by a hundred names" (371). Many of these evoke the family tree: "offshoots . . . grown / Beyond relation to the parent trunk" (316), or "There was a tree that was a father" (213). They all combine in an effort to piece together and complete both lines, the family line as lineage and the poetic line as lineation.

Although Derrida points out the hostility between languages, Stevens—by claiming that French and English are one and the same, by choosing to ignore their internal differences and conflicts of meaning (their *différends*)—may in fact have been prescribing an ethical purpose for poetry, creating the conditions for Ricoeur's "linguistic hospitality." When he wrote of a compound, he chose "the *imagination's* Latin" (as opposed to the historical one) and made it clear that he spoke as a poet, not as a lexicographer. To this day, poetry remains the medium in which both languages might indeed become one, the only habitat large enough to host several languages, in which, as Ricoeur suggests, "the pleasure of inhabiting the language of an other is compensated by the pleasure of hosting, in one's own dwelling, the word of the foreigner" (20; my translation).

"Poetry is a response to the daily necessity of getting the world right," Stevens writes, both in his "Adagia" (913) and as a gift to his daughter, when he inscribed her copy of *The Auroras of Autumn*. One of the ways in which Stevens succeeded in this task was precisely by claiming a link of kinship and by taming the jealousy at the heart of languages, which Derrida exposed in the following terms: "Because there is no natural property of language, language gives rise only to appropriative madness, to jealousy without appropriation. Language speaks this jealousy; it is nothing but jealousy unleashed" (24). Stevens attempted to pacify the ancient rivalry between French and English by writing from a place where the two languages meet, by repeatedly invoking an imaginary "pays" ("All of us, you, he and I, carry round in us some such 'pays,' " he writes [L 568]), that is to say, a country made to resonate with "*paix*" (peace), especially when pronounced with an English accent. His use of foreign words was one thing that helped expose embedded nationalistic discourses, as Theodor Adorno remarks in "Words From Abroad." When asked to justify his use of foreign words, Adorno replied that as children already, during World War One, he and his friend used foreign words as weapons to unmask patriots in hiding. But, he added, the impulse toward foreign words is first and foremost an erotic impulse, "a kind of linguistic exogamy" (Adorno 61; my translation). It springs from a love of the other, which nationalists, instinctively, condemn.

Another strategy used by Stevens to enfranchise and liberate his English was to choose words that crossed over from one language into another, using both their original meanings and their derivative ones. By doing so, he defeated the very French (and politically dubious) notion of

faux amis, a notion invented in France and now applied to a variety of languages. The *faux amis* (literally *false friends*) are words that survive across languages, yet with different meanings. Stevens was very much aware of these migrations of words and derivations of meanings, and he often preferred the foreign meaning over the local one: he used the word *parent* “in the French sense” (as meaning not just a mother or father but the wider family circle); he found that the adjective *jolly* agreed with its close friend *joli* (pretty), and took *foyer* to mean not just a lobby, but a home or household in “Crude Foyer” and “Local Objects.”

Embedded in the phrase *faux amis* is the whole vocabulary of loyalty and betrayal, of friendship and war, which takes us back to James, and merely confirms the implicit logics of war and peace at work in languages. W. Rothwell, who examined the origins of *faux amis* in Anglo-French in his article “The Legacy of Anglo-French: *faux amis* in French and English,” speaks of “semantic traps which now lie in wait of the unwary users of French and English”:

The transformation of the lexis of English as a result of the Norman invasion of 1066 has long been recognized. . . . An important outcome of the wholesale use of French on English soil after the Conquest has been the creation of many semantic traps which now lie in wait for the unwary users of French and English, the *faux amis*. . . . [I]n reality, when viewed in historical terms, the *faux amis* are far more than mere curiosities of language: they are like rocks sticking up out of the sea, isolated remnants of a vanished land now lost beneath the waves. That land is the French of medieval England: the *faux amis* are a reminder of its importance. (16)

These confusions are precisely what the language teacher warns one against: beware of words that look familiar; never trust a word to mean what you expect it to mean or else you might be lured away from your meaning here and now into a geographical and temporal elsewhere. But this is precisely what Stevens tried to do in his poems—to help words circulate freely, across continents and languages.

Stevens’ aphorism, therefore, is not merely anachronistic. It cannot simply be understood as referring back to a period when French and English were in fact one language. Stevens did resort to Latin roots; he did seek to revive old meanings and salvage forgotten words. But the aphorism may also have been prescriptive, part of a wider attempt at thawing the frozen meanings of terms by appealing to languages where even nouns are gendered. “Progress in any aspect is a movement through changes of terminology” (900). Poetry is certainly a way of emancipating language from linguistic borders, from the paradigms of error, falsehood, and betrayal, a way of rewarding semantic shifts and other slippings or trippings of the tongue.

My house has changed a little in the sun.
The fragrance of the magnolias comes close,
False flick, false form, but falseness close to kin. (333)

To get the world “right,” one may need words to sound “wrong,” as Stevens himself insisted. Asked by Henry Church to comment on a few translations of Stevens’ poems into French, he appeared wary of any naturalizing process and suggested alternatives: “But what I had in mind was something bizarre. Personally, I like words to sound wrong” (L 340). In French, Stevens hoped for “The liaison, the blissful liaison, / Between himself and his environment” (28), a “liaison” whose erotic meaning, prominent in French, echoes back and modifies Stevens’ otherwise unobtrusive use of “affair” in that other aphorism: “Life is an affair of people not of places. But for me life is an affair of places and that is the trouble” (901).

University of Paris IV, Sorbonne
France

Notes

¹Wallace Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 911. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with page number only in parentheses.

²See Heidegger’s essays “‘ . . . Poetically, Man Dwells . . . ’”—a title borrowed from Hölderlin—and “Building Dwelling Thinking.”

Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor W. “Mots de l’étranger.” *Mots de l’étranger et autres essais: Notes sur la littérature II*. Trans. Lambert Barthélémy et Gilles Moutot. Paris: La Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, 2004. 59–76.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Monolingualism of the Other, or The Prosthesis of Origin*. Trans. Patrick Mensah. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996.
- Heidegger, Martin. “Building Dwelling Thinking.” *Poetry, Language, Thought*. New York: Harper & Row, 1971. 141–60.
- . “‘ . . . Poetically, Man Dwells . . . ’” *Philosophical and Political Writings*. Ed. Manfred Stassen. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group (The German Library), 2003. 265–313.
- James, Henry. *The Golden Bowl*. 1904. London: Penguin, 1985.
- Mallarmé, Stéphane. “Crise de vers.” *Igitur, Divagations, Un coup de dés*. Intro. Yves Bonnefoy. Paris: Gallimard, 1976.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *Sur la traduction*. Paris: Bayard, 2004.
- Rothwell, W. “The Legacy of Anglo-French: *faux amis* in French and English.” *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie*. Vol. 109. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1993. 16–46.
- Stevens, Wallace. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*. Ed. Holly Stevens. 1966. Berkeley: U of California P, 1996.
- . *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson. New York: Library of America, 1997.

Wallace Stevens and France: The Twilight after the Lecture

ROBERT REHDER

FRANCE HAD A SPECIAL place in Wallace Stevens' imagination. According to his daughter, he probably began to learn French (and German) when he was five at a kindergarten in Reading, Pa., run by a French woman (*SP* 9). He studied Greek and Latin at Reading Boys' High School and no records exist of his doing any more French or German until he was at Harvard (1897–1900), where he took an elementary course his first year and literature courses the other two years (*L* 17, 23, 33–34). Although there were many reasons for him to choose German—his mother spoke some German, German was widely spoken in Reading as he grew up, the lectures in his Harvard second-year course on “Goethe and his Time” were in German, and he was reading Nietzsche in German in 1944 (*L* 461–62)—he preferred French, and he obviously worked at it, because as a young lawyer, he was reading Balzac's *Le Peau de chagrin* in 1906 (*SP* 164), *La Chartreuse de Parme* in 1908, and *The Oxford Book of French Verse* the next year and translating Joachim du Bellay (*L* 109, 151, 156).

French when Stevens was learning it was the international language and French culture continued to enjoy the prestige that it had established during the time of Louis XIV, and for Stevens, as he grew up, this came to include French cuisine and French wine. Paris had been the capital of painting for over a hundred years and remained so until the Second World War. Of the European literatures, only French and English have had major authors during the whole period of their existence. Moreover, for American poets of Stevens' generation, the French poetry from Baudelaire to Valéry had a decisive effect on their conception of poetry and their practice. This poetry T. S. Eliot calls “the most interesting, possibly the most characteristic, and certainly the most original development of the aesthetic of verse made in that period as a whole” (28–29). In 1948, to William Van O'Connor, Stevens expresses his disappointment with the discussion of the theory of poetry in Stanley Edgar Hyman's *The Armed Vision*. Hyman, he says, “spreads himself on English and American things,” when “the great source of modern poetics is probably France” (*L* 598). Earlier, his disclaimer to Hi Simons in 1941 needs to be understood as an act of self-defense:

I have read something, more or less, of all of the French poets mentioned by you [Baudelaire, Verlaine, Mallarmé, Laforgue and Valéry], but, if I have picked up anything from them, it has been unconsciously. (L 391)

Stevens' poetry is so permeated by his knowledge, conscious and unconscious, of the French poetry from Baudelaire to Valéry that he has to push it away in order to protect his originality and his "vital self" (L 815).

Stevens, moreover, has made whatever he has borrowed so much his own that it is impossible in most cases to identify a source or sources. His reply (in French!) to René Taupin in 1929 about the influence of French upon his work is very much to the point and should be read with his letter to Simons: "La légèreté, la grâce, le son et la couleur de français ont eu sur moi une influence indéniable et une influence précieuse" (qtd. in Rehder, *Poetry of Wallace Stevens* 114) [The lightness, grace, sound and color of French have had on me an undeniable influence and a precious influence], and Stevens goes so far as to say in "Adagia": "French and English constitute a single language."¹ This deliberately paradoxical statement means in practice that French words can be used in English sentences. That his language was somehow double and half foreign was deeply satisfying, as that made it the perfect instrument for expressing his "reality-imagination complex" (L 792).

Stevens seeks . . . to use all the notes in the scale, and French provides another scale, doubling his range and enabling him to find two equivalents for every English expression, one in the world, the other in the man-made world of French, so that English can be at once the second and the first term of a metaphor. The second language incorporated in the first also facilitates movement back and forth between Stevens' seriousness and comedy; it is a sign of the essential playfulness of his poetry ("one uses French for the pleasure that it gives") as well as creating greater possibilities of irony. (115)²

French and France offered Stevens another identity: "I suppose that if I ever go to Paris the first person I meet will be myself since I have been there in one way or another for so long" (L 665), he tells Bernard Heringman in 1950. He lived vicariously through what he read and imagined about life in Paris. To Paule Vidal, in 1953, he writes:

I am one of the many people around the world who live from time to time in a Paris that has never existed and that is composed of the things that other people, primarily Parisians themselves, have said about Paris. That particular Paris communi-

cates an interest in life that may be wholly fiction, but, if so, it is precious fiction. (L 773)

He remarks to Barbara Church in 1948 about Paule Vidal's father from whom he bought books and paintings before the Second World War,

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

The way *fromagerie* is employed in the sentence shows us how French and English are the same language and the final comment demonstrates Stevens' awareness of how much of everyday life is imaginary—with only intermittent contact with the world outside. Knowing that M. Vidal would send him the "cheese with raisins in it" if he asked is *almost* what living in France or anywhere amounts to. Living somewhere does not mean being in constant contact with the reality, as so much of the time we are day-dreaming or seeing what we remember and expect to see. Thinking about France and particularly Paris enlarged his life, at the same time as validating his sense of how things are. "Paris," he says to Barbara Church in 1952, "seems to be more than ever a centre, this spring, if there is a centre anywhere" (L 751), and a little later to Paule Vidal, in 1952, he remarks: "There seems to be only one place left in the world, and that, of course, is Paris, in which . . . something fundamentally gay and beautiful still survives" (L 755). He writes to Paule Vidal in 1953: "to have a foothold in a bookshop in Paris is one of my most treasured possessions" (L 773).

Stevens had a wide and miscellaneous knowledge of French life and literature. André Gide's *Journal*, he informs Henry Church in 1944, "has taken the place of Flaubert's Letters" (L 461), and he is thinking about buying a complete set. He is reading Jules Renard's *Journal* that he acquired just before the Second World War, he says to Church in 1945 (L 510), and he is looking for an article on Alain, he tells José Rodríguez Feo in 1952 (L 740), an interest that dates from before the Second World War (see his letter to Paule Vidal in 1945 [L 491]). With Barbara Church, he discusses his pleasure in a volume of letters by Romain Rolland: "they are full of glimpses of Parisian life sixty years ago" and "placed me in close contact with a man who was not in any sense a big man but who was one of the most interesting men of the last generation or two" (L 657). A week later, he writes to Rodríguez Feo that he is "finding these letters interesting beyond belief and for no particular reason. . . . Somehow it interested me immensely to know that one has noisy neighbors in Paris." He talks about Rolland's wife's dusting and comments: "How much more closely that sort of thing brings one to Paris than remarks about the growth of

interest in Socialism" (L 657). It is "close contact" with ordinary, everyday things that engages Stevens. This is why he likes journals and letters, and is unconcerned that Jules Renard "is never recognized as one of the masters of our lives" (L 510) or that Rolland is not "a big man." The short, epigrammatic essays of Alain have some of this casual, spontaneous quality and an interest in everyday life, although he is a writer of a different caliber, but Stevens is interested in what they are, not in their reputations, and again his comments reveal the remove at which he felt he lived from the world. Paris was a way of temporarily filling that emptiness. Renard, Alain, and Rolland are authors that many French readers and students of French literature would not know or have read.

French references are scattered throughout Stevens' poetry, because "French and English constitute a single language." They are not part of any plan or program. He mentions a French place or uses a French word as he needs it. This is very often simply to achieve his own purposes, to say what he means, not necessarily as an allusion to anything specific. The "isle" in section XXI of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" is "The opposite of Cythère" (410), a name that can conjure up Baudelaire's "Un Voyage à Cythère" and Verlaine's *Fêtes galantes*, but in this context it is enough if it is understood as the French form of the Greek island of Venus, although the blackness and the idea of opposition are, I believe, derived from Baudelaire. As the protagonist wanders "on the stair of glass" in section XXV of the same poem, "Life fixed him . . . / With its attentive eyes." Then, as he stood on his balcony,

There were looks that caught him out of empty air.
C'est toujours la vie qui me regarde . . . This was
Who watched him, always, for unfaithful thought. (412)

The French here represents his consciousness, his inner thoughts—clearly demonstrating the extent to which Stevens enjoys entering into French life—and poetry. The technique is similar to the one Stevens employs in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," where he has adapted his refrain from Baudelaire's "L'Invitation au voyage" to denote the inner world of the perceiver.³ Stevens may not have had a specific French poem in mind, but the idea of being watched by an external agent occurs in Baudelaire's "Correspondances," where nature is a temple with living columns and "L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles / Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers" (13) [There man passes through forests of symbols / Who observe him with familiar looks]. Stevens constructs an analogous strangeness.

The final section of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" closes with a poem addressed to the earth as a fat girl. That it is an address shows that Stevens wants communication, not merely description. That the earth is personified as a woman is a recognition of the basic psychological truth

that the baby comes to see the mother as the first object (other than itself) and then gradually separates the mother from the world—a lifelong process that is never completed. Thus, the fat girl points to the fact that our sense of reality has been and is disengaged from our imagination of the mother. This relation between the imagination and reality was the source of Stevens' poetry. He writes to Bernard Heringman in 1951:

Sometimes I believe most in the imagination for a long time and then, without reasoning about it, turn to reality and believe in that and that alone. But both of these things project themselves endlessly and I want them to do just that. (L 710)

The alternation and interrelation of reality and the imagination are shown at the start of the poem by the fat girl's being "terrestrial" (of the earth); by "my summer," but not the other seasons (summer is the time for Stevens when reality is most intense and accessible); and by "my night," but not the day (night is the time of dreams; the day, of reality). The two *my's* emphasize the personal nature of perception, that the world may be slightly different for each person. The speaker tries to understand how he apprehends the world. He finds the fat girl "in difference," because she is never the same, always changing—"a change not quite completed." She is an aberration because she constantly strays from the straight or right path. This is what they will get "*straight* one day at the Sorbonne" (351; italics added). Because she is always changing, she evades any description of her and all theories and reasoning about her. Thus she is a phantom, an imaginary figure. Our feelings get in the way of our perceptions. The world is there; the sense-data forces itself upon us, "unprovoked sensation" (351) is what happens first, then we try to make sense of it. As Stevens says in the section's fourth poem: "We reason of these things with later reason" (346).

Our feelings distort our perceptions and consequently our vision and understanding of reality. The poet is struggling to find the right words to describe all this. The world is a "phantom," "the irrational / Distortion." He hesitates and begins again: "the more than rational distortion, / The fiction that results from feeling" (351). The "That's it" and "Yes, that" mark his struggle, his searching and finding. Stevens wants to show us that thinking is a process of constant revision. We are left with "The fiction that results from feeling." At some future time, as reasoning is always after the fact, the scholars at the Sorbonne will have worked all this out. The poet and the fat girl return from the lecture pleased that the so-called irrational has been explained, until touched by feeling in the twilight, which suggests the uncertain boundary between the conscious and the unconscious, he calls her by name: "my green, my fluent mundo." He uses a Spanish word, because reality is foreign and a French word in this Parisian setting would not be foreign enough. At this naming, the world "will have

stopped revolving except in crystal" (351); that is, the world will continue to change, but will be seen clearly, as if through transparent glass. This moment, somewhat prosaically reported, is a hypothetical one, set at an indefinite future time, "one day," and it resembles the moment in "Description Without Place" "in which being would / Come true," "where / Dazzle yields to a clarity" (and things are seen clearly), and "we are content, / In a world that shrinks to an immediate whole" (298).

Almost a year after the publication of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" in September 1942, Stevens was invited to lecture at Mount Holyoke College. The lecture, "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet," was delivered in August 1943. The poet, he says, lives in a "radiant and productive world" in which "the philosopher is an alien" (678). The poet's pleasure there is that "of agreement" with this world. "Agreement," of course, leaves the exact relation open. Stevens continues:

It is the *mundo* of the imagination in which the imaginative man delights and not the gaunt world of the reason. The pleasure is the pleasure of powers that create a truth that cannot be arrived at by the reason alone, a truth that the poet recognizes by sensation. (679)

The "Fat girl" is fat, because the imagination's powers are large and because the world of reason is gaunt. That this personification persists throughout the poem is a recognition of the ineluctable action of the imagination in perception. After the lecture at the Sorbonne, the poet finds the right words after being "flicked by feeling" (351), not because he heard them at the lecture. Whatever the lecture may have contributed, the truth "cannot be arrived at by the reason alone."

Commentators have not sufficiently emphasized the strangeness of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" and its ending. One might think that the article should be definite, *the* instead of *a*, and that only one fiction can be supreme. One might think that a supreme fiction would be a substitute for religion, and, in a sense, it is, in that it relates to fundamental belief, but for Stevens it has nothing to do with morals, the meaning of life, or anything supernatural. He is not interested in interpreting the world, but in apprehending it and understanding how perception works, which explains his concern with origins and the first idea. The purpose of the supreme fiction, as Stevens sees it, is to enable us to see the world clearly—or, to believe that it can be seen clearly. The three imperatives—"It Must Be Abstract," "It Must Change," "It Must Give Pleasure" that state the prerequisites of a supreme fiction—do not assign any order or meaning to the world, except that of poetry and "faithful speech" (352), with *faithful* again meaning accurate, faithful to the world. These imperatives are strange in that they apply to the belief rather than to the believer and imply that it is the believer's task to create his or her own beliefs, as if our fundamental

beliefs can be chosen. The ideas (abstraction, change, pleasure) are alien to the values of most religions. The first, "It Must Be Abstract," does not really describe the poem, which, although abstract in many ways, is full of personifications, imaginary, almost allegorical figures, and small stories, and the poems in all three parts are a little to one side of the titles.

The poet, finding the world constantly evading him, wants a language that corresponds to reality, that names it "flatly," uses "faithful speech," not description without place. Thinking about the difficulties, he realizes the part that the imagination plays in perception and accepts that what he beholds is "the more than natural figure," "the irrational / Distortion" and "the more than rational distortion," that feeling generates fictions, and in this case, with the suggestion that, among other fictions, they generate a supreme fiction. This is what one day they will get straight at the Sorbonne. Stevens respects scholars and academic discourse, and the rabbi who stands for scholarship is a recurrent figure in his poems, but their knowledge has its limits. "There had been an age," he states in "Someone Puts a Pineapple Together,"

When a pineapple on the table was enough,
Without the forfeit scholar coming in,
Without his enlargings and pale arrondissements,
Without the furious roar in his capital. (695)

The scholar is forfeit because he pays a price for his knowledge, which involves a surrender of part of the truth. His divisions and boundaries are superimposed upon the world. He comes later when the object has lost its vivid immediacy and reasons about "these things with later reason" (in this sense we are all scholars and all our discourse is academic). *Arrondissement* is a French administrative district, most often used in relation to the twenty districts of Paris, which would appear to be the capital in this case.⁴ Here again we have a French term used for mind-made distinctions imposed from without and Paris as the center of this imaginary activity. The scholars at the Sorbonne, an Academy of Fine Ideas, behave in a similar way in explaining "that the irrational is rational" (351). Their rationalization is also superimposed upon reality.

The decisive moment, however, is after the lecture, in the twilight in which the bright light of the day's reality merges with the oncoming darkness of the night's imaginings. Only then, only when "flicked by feeling," he calls the fat girl by name. This happens as a result of being "flicked," lightly or smartly and briefly touched by feeling. The action is definite, but minimal. What role if any the lecture plays in all this is unstated. That the world is a *mundo* in an English poem is an indication of the imagination's participation in perception. At the end the poet has the possibility of seeing the earth with its revolutions and changes with transparent clar-

ity, *almost* as it is, because it is nonetheless not immediately apprehended, but seen through crystal. Moreover, this moment is hypothetical. It will happen some time, "one day," in an unspecified future in a foreign country. The purpose of a supreme fiction would appear to be to enable us to believe in the possibility of this imaginary moment. For Stevens, the moment, although imaginary, needs a setting, and that setting is Paris, where he has never been and never expects to go, but about which he has read so much and in which he has repeatedly imagined himself living. Stevens in his poetry, often in decisive places in major poems, uses France and French to make the imaginary real.

University of Fribourg
Switzerland

Notes

¹Wallace Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 914. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with page number(s) only in parentheses.

²See my *The Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, 110–19 for the whole discussion as well as "Wallace Stevens: 'French and English Constitute a Single Language.'" "

³See the full discussion of this poem in my *The Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, 119–32.

⁴This passage and poem are discussed at length in my *Stevens, Williams, Crane and the Motive for Metaphor*, 16–32.

Works Cited

- Baudelaire, Charles. "Correspondances." *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Ed. Antoine Adam. Paris: Garnier Frères, 1961. 13.
- Eliot, T. S. "From Poe to Valéry." 1949. *To Criticize the Critic: Eight Essays on Literature and Education*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965. 27–42.
- Rehder, Robert. *The Poetry of Wallace Stevens*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988.
- . *Stevens, Williams, Crane and the Motive for Metaphor*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- . "Wallace Stevens: 'French and English Constitute a Single Language.'" *Dialogues of Culture*. Ed. Eva Kushner and Haga Toru. Bern: Peter Lang, 2000. 185–92.
- Stevens, Holly. *Souvenirs and Prophecies: The Young Wallace Stevens*. New York: Knopf, 1977.
- Stevens, Wallace. *The Letters of Wallace Stevens*. Ed. Holly Stevens. Knopf: 1966.
- . *Wallace Stevens: The Collected Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson. New York: Library of America, 1997.

Poems

So Noble That . . .

*Exposing a tawdry joke at the bottom of
"Mrs. Alfred Uruguay"*

The later Stevens built his own Parnassus
Of towering poems, forbidding and austere.
It's not a place for jokes on tits and asses—
So why is *Mrs. U.* appearing here?

The sun goes down, so what (the moon, she's full),
Upon this refuge from some soiree,
Who's elegant—in velvet, not in wool—
One senses that she wants to get away.

She commandeers a donkey, rides uphill
And past a horseman riding down—the end.
Who was it? (Virile Youth); His horse? (All Will);
How noble was that rider round the bend?

It's Stevens, the *lecteur* and *philosophe*,
Who asks these questions, but it is his other—
Old Wally, that insurance-fellow oaf—
Who prods the reader, finally, toward another:

This guy meets Mrs. Alfred Uruguay
High on a mountain, gowned as for a dance,
Astride a donkey, and does what?

Rides by
And never gives her ass a backward glance.

Frank Osen
Pasadena, Calif.

To Him and Him

Passionate, austere
Puritan word-circus, pit
of glory, tell me
what you see now,
cloudy-driven man of action,
one-man band playing
oboe, drum, and cornet.
It was that damned jar
and the funny guitar
conjoined with hard winter's ice
and summer auroras
that made our green and purpling
spires spring taller.
You entered as a lover
disguised by a cibidian orchid
in your lapel, seduced, but not fatally,
by beauty, and left as a lover
waiting in a familiar room,
its windows wide open.
You spun so fast, plump
brown fox, that your dark velvet fur
caught our own dark sparks
with effulgences of fire.

Patricia Corbus
Sarasota, Fla.

M'Amour

*And thus an elevation, as if I lived
With something I could touch, touch every way.
—Stevens, "First Warmth"*

Watchful, at the window, stretched
like the bow that bends the moon,
she is solidity and down, reaching
the silver-sharp sound—m'amour—

Wrapped like a spool around its treasure,
the onion-skinned soul stings and sings
its way out. Her white hands unfold
lilies in a silver beam.

She watches the moon drag her shadow
where dandelions blown from their stalk
whirl in the cool breeze like tufts of fog.
Caught in the eerie light she is beautiful.

Radiant, with something she can touch,
touch every way, she holds to that thought
that can't dissolve, neither in distance
nor water nor air—

nor in the word made of substance and
one single breath—m'amour—my love.

Patrizia de Rachewiltz
's Hertogenbosch
The Netherlands

**Wallace Stevens,
Or Upon the Appointment of a Poet
To the Post of Vice President of the Insurance Company**

“Who authorized you to call yourself a poet?” the judge asked Joseph Brodsky during his trial in 1964. “No one,” Brodsky responded. “Who gave me the authority to enter the human race?”

Poems can't guarantee anything. Chatterton, stumbling, climbs up to his small attic room, jots off a note and swallows his bane. Mr. Poe hardly rakes in a quarter per line. He's already finished the cheese-loving Crow. (Nevertheless, said the Crow, will I let it drop.) Pushkin writes debts in a column on a poem draft—mournful numbers indeed, a ciphered poem of sorts, steadily growing from month to month. Rimbaud goes to trade in Africa; Mandelstam chances upon a cheap coat at the Rostov market place. There you have it—a nice little company. You can call it an insurance company—sure, why not? The judge asks, “Who authorized you?”—The bard quietly but firmly replies: “The Directors' Board.” Excellent company! Goethe, Princess Badroulbador and Mr. Stevens. Insurance against fire, war and the end of the word. This is not the end of the world. For from now on forever in each fraction of frost there sits and ponders a crystalline lens. Snow dust slowly falls off the top of a northern pine. The palm at wit's end pines for a reply as a nightingale pines for the fall of night.

Grigory Krushkov
Moscow, Russia

Reviews

Wallace Stevens across the Atlantic.

Edited by Bart Eeckhout and Edward Ragg. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

Wallace Stevens across the Atlantic has its origins in the first major European conference on Stevens, “Fifty Years On: Wallace Stevens in Europe,” held at the Rothermere American Institute in Oxford in 2005. As editors Bart Eeckhout and Edward Ragg stress, their collection does more than revisit in print this landmark event; instead the essays gathered here comprise a new body of work that has evolved out of the debates begun in Oxford. The result is a book with greater integrity *qua* book than many published proceedings, yet one that retains the energy of interpersonal exchange. The dialogic quality of the collection is enhanced by the welcome blend among the contributors of eminent Stevensians and newer voices. The fourteen essays collected here read Stevens across the Atlantic from a rich variety of national perspectives.

Eeckhout and Ragg have set themselves a task as editors that is as demanding as it is necessary to “redefine the contours” of Stevens criticism for a “new era” (xii). Perhaps paradoxically, to read Stevens transatlantically is also to make him relevant for a new generation of American Studies: Eeckhout, Ragg, and their contributors present a Stevens who is tractable to the internationalizing and comparativist paradigms that, since the “transatlantic turn” of the 1990s, have been at the forefront of the discipline. A global Stevens had, of course, emerged in the earlier scholarship of George Lensing and others who have drawn attention to Stevens’ transactions—commercial, aesthetic, interpersonal, and imaginative—with Europe. Nonetheless, this collection is the first systematic exploration of the special relationship that both binds Stevens to and insists on his American difference from the European stimuli that inform his thought. Frank Kermode, who was instrumental in introducing Stevens both to a European readership and to the undergraduate classroom, provides an authoritative preface to *Wallace Stevens across the Atlantic* that demonstrates that it is not only possible but also highly productive to read Stevens transatlantically, without erasing his Americanness. The fact that the poet, as Kermode puts it, “prefer[red] a Europe of his own construction to the real thing” (xvii) makes him an intriguing if recalcitrant transatlantic subject whose poetry and prose require precisely the kind of nuanced exegesis offered in the essays that follow. Indeed, the editors’ introduction warns against reductive readings both of the “American” qualities of Stevens’ poetry and of the ways in which his verse assimilates “European” subjects. Eeckhout and Ragg stress what several of their contributors also emphasize, Stevens’ *imaginative* construction of place.

Stevens’ fictive projections of Europe are the subject of the essays that comprise the first part of the book. The essays in the second subsection concern his philosophical conversations with Europe, and are supplemented in the third part by essays that address his European reception. In the first of these subsections, essays by Lensing, J. Hillis Miller, and Robert Rehder treat Stevens as a *glocalist*—that is, as a poet who approaches a global perspective *via* the local. Of particular note here is Lensing’s supple exploration of “Stevens’s Invention of Europe.” This sterling analysis, elicited

from Stevens' working notebooks and from a sensitive reading of his correspondence as a passport to other worlds, offers us a poet for whom "The seeming of Europe was his seeing of it" (20). Miller's Stevens is both indigene and cosmopolite: "The River of Rivers in Connecticut" is an emphatically "local abstraction" (26), an ultimate poem of the mind imbricated with the topographical particularity of Farmington and of Haddam. Miller, whose earlier essays had set Stevens in the midst of the theory wars, now describes him as a "hybrid poet" (39), and himself as a hybrid critic, who fuses homegrown American New Criticism with continental deconstruction in his reading of the poem.

The "Philosophical Conversations" that make up the second part of the collection occupy what is perhaps more familiar terrain in Stevens scholarship. Nonetheless, this section maintains the impressive standard of the collection as a whole, opening with two superb chapters: Charles Altieri's surely definitive comparison of Stevens and Husserl and Krzysztof Ziarek's agile reappraisal of Heidegger and late Stevens. Justin Quinn's assessment of Stevens and the (post)Christian, and Josh Cohen's survey of Stevens, Schlegel, Blanchot, Mallarmé, and Freud are followed by two important reassessments of Stevens and the visual arts. David Haglund's discussion of Stevens, early modernism, and the European art invasion that was New York Dada is complemented by Edward Ragg's no less lucid discussion of painterly abstraction in later Stevens. Lisa Goldfarb's essay concludes this section with the curiously understudied topic of Stevens and Valéry.

The third part of *Wallace Stevens across the Atlantic* addresses the vexed issue of Stevens' European reception. Mark Ford's wonderful essay at last redresses the critical neglect of the remarkable relations between Stevens, the English Surrealist poet Nicholas Moore, and the Fortune Press, which pre-empted Faber & Faber by publishing, without permission, an English edition of a *Selected Poems* in 1952. Gareth Reeves' re-reading of Stevens' influence on the poetics of Charles Tomlinson is perhaps more convincing than Irene Ramalho Santos' avowedly speculative study of "affinity" in Stevens and Portuguese poet António Ramos Rosa. The section concludes with Massimo Bacigalupo's compelling account of Stevens and Italian (and French) translation. The collection is brought to a close by Dutch artist Helga Kos. Her fascinating coda describes the commission she received from the Amsterdam music ensemble Wendingen to use a number of Stevens' late poems as a pretext for a series of screen paintings. Handsome reproductions of these merit comparison with Jasper Johns's and David Hockney's tributes to what Kos calls "the capacity of Stevens' poetry to enthrall" (231). The seven poems in question had earlier been set to music by the American composer Ned Rorem, and Kos's paintings were exhibited in the course of a 1997 performance of that song-cycle. In its international dimensions, and in the rich eclecticism of its response to Stevens, this event would prefigure the Rothermere conference and the important collection that has emerged from that gathering. *Wallace Stevens across the Atlantic* is itself proof that the "new era" of Stevens criticism it predicts is already underway.

Lee M. Jenkins
University College Cork

Luminations.

Images by Oriole Farb Feshbach for the poem "The Auroras of Autumn" by Wallace Stevens. New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2008.

*Scientists say they have discovered what
makes the northern lights dance.*

—*New York Times*, July 25, 2008

In 1947, as Paul Mariani tells us in a thoughtful and informing Foreword to this elegant book, Wallace Stevens composed "what has come to be, perhaps, his capstone poem" (v). In that year, the poet of "The Auroras of Autumn" had turned sixty-eight. Mariani touches on the major themes of what may well be Stevens' crowning achievement: its moments of the sublime, the "grand spectacle" of the northern lights; its focus on the transitory, on aging; its extraordinary verbal imagery. He introduces the Serpent of Time, the "sublime majesty and terror" that serpent evokes; the penetrating sense of loss, the disappearance of what was, physical aging. But against the radiant color-play of the aurora borealis, Mariani juxtaposes the "terrible Sublime" of the Atom Bomb, "a cloud expanding like a flower, the light like ten thousand suns, annihilating every last human who stops and turns upon the sand to stare into its terrible, formless and still forming face" (v). He is telling us that the abysmal experience of loss, the overwhelming emptiness summoned up in this poem, is more than a perspective of aging, more than the persistence of recollection, more than childhood memories of father and mother, now gone, or an iconic empty cabin at the beach. He is suggesting, I think rightly, that the poem's ten cantos, each of them precisely constructed of eight stanzas of tercets, contain the loss of a generation. For all of humanity, the construction and dropping of the atomic bomb signified a catastrophic end of innocence.

But the hovering sadness of "The Auroras of Autumn" may have had an extremely personal motivation as well. For on Good Friday of 1947, Stevens' beloved friend, Henry Church, died suddenly—at the age of sixty-eight. His death, according to the poet's daughter, "ended one of the closest friendships Stevens ever had with another man" (L 555). One recalls the heartfelt lines that open "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," immediately following Stevens' dedication of the poem to Henry Church:

And for what, except for you, do I feel love?
Do I press the extremest book of the wisest man
Close to me, hidden in me day and night?
In the uncertain light of single, certain truth,
Equal in living changingness to the light
In which I meet you, in which we sit at rest,
For a moment in the central of our being,
The vivid transparency that you bring is peace.

(Collected Poetry and Prose 329)

Although his personal letter of condolence to Barbara Church is characteristically restrained, Stevens' ode to autumn is Keatsian: well-proportioned, elegiac in tone, its depths of emotion expressed in the music of its lines. On the back cover of *Lumina-*

tions, Harold Bloom is aptly quoted: “no other twentieth-century poem in English takes us further or more powerfully into the mode of the Sublime.”

Stevens’ poem meditates on the approach of death; it is dark, often chilling, but it also hints at something beyond generation and corruption. Its Platonic underpinnings of Cave and Image, Recollection and Idea, weave a philosophical thread of transcendence through the glooming cantos. The brilliant auroral lights—the banner-title floating over the poem—are a *recurring* cosmic phenomenon, magical, awe-inspiring. The serpent sheds its skin “again and again and again” (v), as Mariani notes, and phoenix-like, is renewed. In her fine Introduction to *Luminations*, art historian Martica Sawin comments, “In fixing on the aurora borealis as the leitmotif that gave its name to the poem . . . Wallace Stevens chose a natural phenomenon that bridges the terrestrial and the celestial” (ix). Although the connection of autumn with the approach of death is inevitable, the auroras of autumn in this poem delicately propose another supreme fiction—an unearthly dimension of consciousness after shedding the physical surround.

An artist has to be bold to arrange her own work, her own aesthetic vision and the visual expression of it, alongside this poem—this serpent-subtle, provocative poem, this startling poem with its well-wrought incoherencies, this in-and-out of focus, transparent, luminous, vivid and fading, fading and resurrected, delicate, darkening, flashing, enigmatic, urgent, stoical-mystical poem. Oriole Farb Feshbach is not only bold, but gifted. She has avoided “illustrating” Stevens’ climactic work in the way that Gustave Doré, for instance, illustrated Coleridge’s narrative of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. “The Auroras of Autumn,” of course, is not a narrative poem but a series of flashbacks and meditations. What *Luminations* offers is a tribute to the poem as a whole and an almost collegial “collaboration” with the poem’s verbal imagery.

The book is lovely to handle, 10 x 8^{1/2} inches, its pages softly glossy, the printing clear and uncrowded. The fifty full-color images, primarily watercolors, distributed throughout vary in size from full-page spreads to rectangles that measure 2 inches on their longest side. What stands out is an impressive diversity of style and technique. Along with watercolors, the artist uses charcoal, pastel, pencil, ink, and the opaque of gouache. A few of the originals are painted on sandpaper. The images can be striking or restrained, geometric and abstract or flaming fractal-like luminosities. Some are alive with motion. Others suggest an Asian stillness and spirituality, such as the two paintings set one over the other illuminating the opening of canto II: “Farewell to an idea . . .”: *A cabin stands . . . / It is white and whiteness grows less vivid*. Or, one finds serenity and energy married and made visible in the wonderful Klee-like *yellow into gold and gold / To its opal elements*. There are the crystalline fractures of *Goat-leaper, crystallized and luminous, sitting / In highest night*. A number of the illuminations suggest photographic slides or planets seen through the lens of a great telescope, but one, *in the ferns . . . / Black beaded*, covers most of the page and is strikingly realistic as well as stylistically elegant. It follows the coiled length of the serpent, Stevens’ “master of the maze,” twisting its way among green ferns—a study in vertical and horizontal contrasts, a study of motion and tension.

Oriole Feshbach has drawn her inspiration from some of the most vivid images in Stevens’ poetry. Is there an artist who could resist “mountains running like water, wave on wave, / Through waves of light,” or one who could imagine “form gulping after formlessness,” as Feshbach has? Here, in “The Auroras,” are skeletal images: “Bare limbs, bare trees and a wind as sharp as salt,” echoes of the aged King Lear. Here,

too, is the solitary scholar of one candle, who sees “An arctic effulgence flaring on the frame / Of everything he is. And he feels afraid.”

One thinks of Stevens, the Master of Understatement, writing some seven years later, in 1954, to Leonard van Geysel, his correspondent in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), with just a glint of humor: “[T]he fact that I am 75 begins to seem like the most serious thing that has ever happened to me.” Then he adds, “Perhaps the way to evade all these considerations is to be like an old Swedish woman who lives in my general neighborhood. She is 90. I don’t believe she has ever really thought of the Atomic Age. She just goes on growing older and remaining cheerful” (L 838–39). As we know, Stevens died the following year. One may hope that, like his own infinite endless serpent, the poet will have found himself “In another nest, the master of the maze / Of body and air and forms and images, / Relentlessly in possession of happiness.” Surely, in creating her *Luminations*, Oriole Farb Feshbach has found a happy way to revitalize the forms and images of Stevens’ grand autumnal poem.

Barbara M. Fisher
The City College of CUNY

Planets on Tables: Poetry, Still Life, and the Turning World.

By Bonnie Costello. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008.

Bonnie Costello opens her rich meditation on still life in modern poetry and visual art with a personal anecdote that resonates for me. “Of the many images that moved me during the destruction of the World Trade Center towers,” Costello reports, “one that stays with me is a still life—a bowl of fruit on a table, covered in ash” (viii), photographed by Steve Wood at Ground Zero. My wife, who is a painter, painted a still life as her way of responding to the same tragedy, which she represented only obliquely in the presence of a newspaper—a convention of still life—and the ghostly form of an apple, the Big Apple. The focus on ordering, arrangement, in the genre of still life answers a need, as Costello movingly demonstrates, that is not only aesthetic but also cultural, “in times of public disturbance” (viii). She applies this thesis to a time of international disturbance—“approximately 1930–1955” (181)—and to the “domestic” space of encounter developed in the poetry of Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Elizabeth Bishop, and Richard Wilbur, and in the “poetic” visual art of Joseph Cornell.

Although only one chapter of Costello’s book focuses on Stevens in particular, his presence is pervasive, as suggested by the allusion to Stevens’ “The Planet on the Table” in Costello’s title. The table is the paradigmatic scene of still life, as Costello confirms through reference to Norman Bryson’s study *Looking at the Overlooked* (Harvard UP, 1990). Stevens’ image of the planet on the table offers an emblem of Costello’s thesis that the “everyday world,” which Bryson connects with the table, is not sealed off from the Big World of historical events, at least in the versions of still life produced by Stevens and the other artists whom Costello has selected for attention. Against Bryson and Susan Stewart, whose book *On Longing* (Johns Hopkins UP, 1984) provides another of Costello’s reference points, Costello finds evidence of narrative, and connections with historical narrative, in her examples of still life. With

regard to Stevens, she writes: “Stevens is certainly tempted by the seductions of the still moment and its suspension of historical process, and his great subject is desire as it is aroused by the sensuous world he seeks to make personal; but by giving voice to the sensibility that yearns for this plenitude, he exposes the troubled, restless state that surrounds still life’s orders” (34).

“Giving voice” is of course the meaning of the term “ecphrasis,” the relationship between poetry and visual art in which poetry speaks for the mute pictorial image. And since poetry’s speech unfolds in time, a temporal or narrative dimension is inherent in that speaking. Thus, there are purely formal reasons for the reinscription of narrative in poetry that responds to still life painting. Although Costello occasionally refers to ecphrasis in *Planets on Tables*, she keeps the issue in the background, reserving the foreground of her argument for historicist rather than formalist explanation. What takes place in Stevens’ poetry, she maintains, was taking place in American culture at large: “Stevens, with America, was shifting away from an easy dichotomy in which ‘here’ was a timeless realm of American stability and ‘there’ a historical realm of European conflict” (37). The terms of this dichotomy, and the understanding of Stevens’ navigation between them, derive in part from Alan Filreis’ efforts to locate Stevens in the historical context of his time, as Costello acknowledges. However, “here” and “there” are also key terms in Stevens’ “Crude Foyer,” a poem that turns out to be at least as significant as “The Planet on the Table” for framing Costello’s argument. In contrast to the enclosed interior space associated with traditional still life, Costello associates the still life of Stevens and his contemporaries with the foyer (21–22), a threshold space between inside and outside, like the doorway in “Angel Surrounded by Paysans.”

Several other historical narratives intertwine with Costello’s central concern with the relation between the art of still life and world historical events such as the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War. The transformation of still life that Costello examines is part of the history of modernism, related to the development of techniques such as collage and of iconography such as the surrealist object, from which “The Planet on the Table” clearly descends. Both of these developments receive special attention in Costello’s chapter on Joseph Cornell. Her selection of poets not only illustrates alternatives within modernism—Stevens and Williams at opposite poles of calm and storm—but also the historical continuation that James Longenbach has called *Modern Poetry After Modernism* (Oxford UP, 1997), in a book that shares Costello’s examples of Bishop and Wilbur.

Within her consideration of each poet, Costello refers to stages of development as a historical sequence, an effort that occasionally tempts her into generalizations that do not do justice to her own closely attentive readings of particular works. For instance, her chapter on Stevens centers on *Parts of a World* (1942), and usefully discusses a series of still life poems from that volume that have received relatively little critical attention up to now: “A Dish of Peaches in Russia,” “Martial Cadenza,” “Dry Loaf,” “Cuisine Bourgeoise,” “Woman Looking at a Vase of Flowers.” To further distinguish this “turn toward still life” in Stevens’ work, Costello posits “a departure from Stevens’s earlier work, in which he had continued the romantic preoccupation with landscape” (30). This assertion appears questionable in light of evidence that Costello herself offers in her study of landscape in modern American poetry, *Shifting Ground* (Harvard UP, 2003), where *Parts of a World* receives nearly as much empha-

sis as it does in *Planets on Tables*. The dialectic of inside and outside that concerns Costello in both of her studies is more accurately represented when she observes “the juxtaposition and convergence of genres” (173), as she frequently does in her close readings. In the conclusion to *Planets on Tables*, after warning against the destruction of “foyers” in major trends of the 1960s and 1970s, Costello finds ground for hope in “the tendency among many recent poets . . . to connect without collapsing proximity and distance, still life and landscape” (173).

Rather than constituting a turn from landscape, the turn toward still life that Costello identifies in Stevens represents a turn away from “The American Sublime” that Harold Bloom, appropriating a title from Stevens, identifies as the tradition of American poetry descended from Emerson. In *Shifting Ground*, Costello seems almost surprised to have described a Stevens who sounds more like Thoreau than Emerson. In *Planets on Tables*, she never mentions Thoreau by name, but his presence, like that of Stevens, is pervasive. For instance, when Costello writes, “Stevens as a pragmatist offers an image of momentary conciliation in a time of worldly conflict and stress” (42), the pragmatism she has in mind owes more to Thoreau’s lessons in contingency than Emerson’s sermons on sublimity. Ultimately, this link to America’s past may prove to be as significant to our understanding of Stevens as the recognition that he responded to present disturbances.

Terence Diggory
Skidmore College

Wallace Stevens and the Realities of Poetic Language.

By Stefan Holander. New York: Routledge, 2008.

Stefan Holander’s *Wallace Stevens and the Realities of Poetic Language* aligns itself with a few other studies that have focused attention on language and form in Wallace Stevens, in particular Beverly Maeder’s *Wallace Stevens’ Experimental Language*. If, in normal acts of communication, we are looking beyond language and try to apprehend what it represents, we forget that words affect us through their sound patterns, syntactic structures, as well as through the traces their usage leaves behind in our memory. According to Maeder, Stevens was aware of these neglected aspects of language and played with them in his poetry, creating a thick material surface that often disconnects itself from the reality it represents and signifies beyond it. Maeder’s analysis transcends the formalism of other linguistically oriented approaches, as the materiality of language is dependent on its usage in social interchange. This is also Holander’s main goal: to analyze formal elements as they cast shadows in their social context. However, he wants to take the approach a step further and reveal a tension between the material surface and the representational function of language.

This study aims to continue along similar lines, assuming that the material of poetry is to a significant extent language itself. It will do so, however, by taking a step “back” into Stevens’ dualistic universe to consider a more problematic sense of “materiality.” If poetic language is understood as an expressive means or instrument, a “device” itself problematically autonomous—prior and exterior—it may not only suggest new possibili-

ties for creativity, but is likely to insinuate a conflict with a conception of poetry as a mental act or subjective expression. (2)

These avowed intentions open up possibilities to synthesize the many aspects of Wallace Stevens criticism—the philosophical, deconstructive, social, biographic, historicist, and linguistic. To bring them all together may seem an impossible task, due to their sometimes opposing views, and this is perhaps why Holander attempts to transcend them by reading the ideological gestures in the form.

Holander starts by considering some of Stevens' early poems, giving particular attention to "Mozart, 1935." The purpose of the first chapter is to untangle the knots of ambiguity in Stevens' attitude toward his social environment as well as toward his literary peers. We find Stevens torn between a desire to innovate in poetry and the contrary impulse to keep away from modernist theorizing on it. In the use of fragmented traditional forms and meters, Stevens at once acknowledges a departure from the tradition and manifests a nostalgia for it, while the modernist innovations make themselves felt in jarringly juxtaposed images and irregular rhythms. This ambivalence toward tradition and innovation is doubled by a similar indecision between the desire to participate in social life, which Holander calls "reality," and the need to remain aloof from it.

All this ambivalence finds a metaphor in the notion of abstraction, which Holander explores at some length. Abstraction can mean extracting an essence but also closing oneself off from other human beings, and this double significance, in Holander's view, expresses what Stevens meant when he referred to the "supreme fiction," saying, "It Must Be Abstract." The fiction thus has both to extract the essence of social life and to close itself off to it.

The second chapter continues the dual exploration of both formal and biographical/social/historical elements, whose purpose is to lead to culturally relevant conclusions. In a new group of poems, Holander discovers another set of tensions. The chapter focuses on Stevens' way of dealing with an "impasse" of self-expression, in terms of both voice and movement. Several poems are examined here, and their rhythms seem to reveal a kind of indecision about whether the poet should throw himself into the messiness of everyday life, or remain isolated in his ivory tower. Holander examines Stevens' exchanges with Stanley Burnshaw, and emphasizes the poet's effort to show how poetry can play a part in social life without becoming a source of slogans.

The third chapter explores Stevens' attempts to "renovate" (renew?) poetic language. Stevens can indeed be said to make language come to life out of cliché and dead metaphor. Curiously, this idea about the language of poetry, so familiar to us from Heidegger, in whose writings Stevens himself found an affinity, is not traced back to the German philosopher. This project of renovation in language relates to romanticism in particular, but it can include the whole tradition of English poetry. Holander finds Stevens self-aware of this very special gift of poetry to revive dead language in "The Man on the Dump," where the images offer themselves from the garbage heap of tradition to be recycled, as it were, by the modernist poet. But the dump can be at the same time a metaphor of modern life, littered as it is with images from newspapers and movies, which would indicate that either tradition or modernity can overuse language to death, and it is up to poetry to endow the words with new life and meaning. As Heidegger puts it: "the poet also uses the word—not, however, like ordinary speakers and writers who have to use them up, but rather in such a way that the word only now becomes and remains truly a word" (*Poetry, Language, Thought*

[Trans. Albert Hofstadter. New York: Harper Row, 1971], 48). Reviving the words this way, Stevens betrays the same kind of ambivalence toward tradition and modernity that he displayed in other poems, an ambivalence that leads to doubts about the poet's own mission in society. Several other poems are interpreted in this chapter to complete the argument that Stevens is struggling to establish a pivotal social role for poetry and creates a tension between the poems' language as/for representation and the materiality of language, which would give poems an "ontological status."

The last chapter attempts to save the poet from a total failure to escape the ivory tower and integrate social life. "Farewell to Florida" emerges as Stevens' forsaking of the languid tropics to return to work, and presumably also leaving behind the hedonistic occupation of writing poetry in order to engage in social life. Here, Holander has to force the argument, as the poem gives no indication that, once back in Connecticut, Stevens would start a revolution or even a philanthropic enterprise. There is also no empirical evidence that he stopped writing poetry.

Holander's critical method is not sufficiently defined and can only be perceived as eclectic. The study looks closely at formal elements, biographical detail, historical background, philosophical ideas, and theoretical arguments made by Stevens himself. Theory, of the non-socially engaged kind, proves to be useful as well. Nor have traditional approaches to literature been in any way neglected, since the prosodic analyses reveal Stevens' deviations from traditional norms.

The eclectic approach leads Holander to review nearly all Stevens' critics. This scrupulous attention to his predecessors, whose work he illuminates in elaborate glosses, crowds Holander's own argument though, and the respect paid to other critics tends to showcase them at the author's expense. Perhaps this is why Holander seeks originality in his choice of poems. He stays away from spectacular and passionate interpretations of poems that haunt most of the critical books, and he labors patiently on some that criticism has more or less ignored. However, one cannot help but wonder whether criticism has done so with good reason. It is hard to find something new to say about a poet who has been the critics' darling for decades, and Holander does his best to revive a reader's interest.

Nevertheless, the overwrought close readings, the glosses of criticism and occasionally of theory, the needless sophistication, the tiresome puns and etymologies that kill rather than reveal significance look like the signs of exhaustion that, in fairness, we cannot attribute to the author but to a profession that has yet to reinvent itself for the new millennium. If Holander sees in Stevens an almost desperation at not finding relevance for the dying art of poetry, his book inspires the same kind of unease regarding the reason to be of criticism.

Anca Rosu
DeVry University

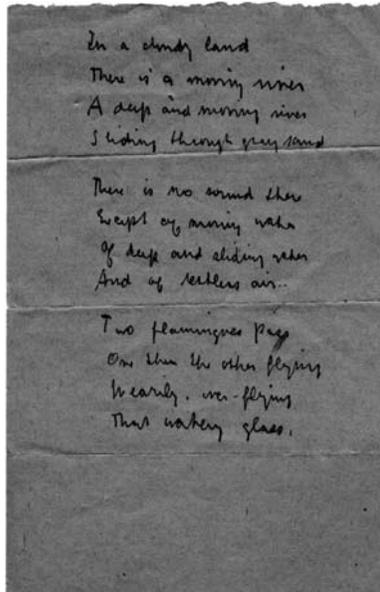
News and Comments

A few years ago, Elliot Ephraim, of Elliot's Books in Northford, Conn., was asked by Peter Hanchak, Wallace Stevens' grandson, to handle the sale of Stevens' art collection, which consisted of thirty-two works, including Pierre Tal-Coat's still life that inspired "Angel Surrounded by Paysans." Ephraim now writes that he has been asked to serve as agent for Stevens' personal possessions as well, which include Stevens' bed, writing desk and chair, secretary, and household furnishings such as chairs, tables, and lamps. Among what Ephraim calls "The Stevens Package" are a large collection of little magazines with Stevens' contributions, several oriental items, and Stevens' own collection of first, limited, and signed editions of his publications. Among these are *Epitaphiana* (Edelstein A7) and *Stevens Family Portraits* (Edelstein A8).

While going through these items on May 3, 2008, Ephraim made a discovery: a handwritten poem by Stevens stuffed in Stevens' desk. He immediately sent an e-mail to John N. Serio, with the enclosed scanned attachment:

I am prompted to write you today because I have discovered a three-verse poem in manuscript on a scrap of folded paper tucked away in a cubbyhole in [Stevens'] secretary. It does not appear when I search it in your concordance.

As far as I know, you are the first academic to be made aware of the existence of this poem, which reads as follows:



In a cloudy land
There is a moving river
A deep and moving river
Sliding through gray sand[.]

There is no sound there
Except of moving water
Of deep and sliding water
And of restless air . . [.]

Two flamingoes pass
One then the other flying
Wearily, over-flying
That watery glass.

The next day, Ephraim wrote again to say he had made another discovery: two quotations, the first handwritten, the second typewritten, also stuffed in the secretary:

Sunday

In the multitude of my
thoughts within me thy
comforts delight my soul.

From the Psalms.

This is from Psalm 94:19 which he refers to in a love letter to Elsie Moll in 1909. [*Editor*: In the letter to Elsie, dated March 21, 1909, Stevens writes: "The vanishing is only an idea, not a feeling; and as an idea, it is only one of the 'multitude of my thoughts within me' " (see J. Donald Blount, ed., *The Contemplated Spouse: Letters of Wallace Stevens to Elsie* 178).]

Ephraim continues:

A second item which I discovered today is a typewritten quote as follows:

Life is always insipid to those who have no great
works in hand and no lofty aims to elevate their feeling.

This aphorism is inscribed on a wall of the Horace Bushnell Memorial Auditorium in Hartford, Connecticut.

Both of the above items were tucked away in a cubbyhole in his secretary!

Interested parties may contact Elliot Ephraim at <outofprintbooks1@mind-spring.com>.

* * *

On Tuesday, May 13, 2008, WSHU of Fairfield, Conn., a National Public Radio station, aired a segment of "All Things Considered," titled "Wallace Stevens: Spring in Connecticut, 'a water-color.'" Reporter Erik Campano interviewed Glen MacLeod, who spoke about Stevens' poems of spring and his deep affection for Connecticut. One can access the interview at <http://www.publicbroadcasting.net/wshu/news.newsmain?action=article&ARTICLE_ID=1277427>.

* * *

The University of Connecticut's 45th annual Wallace Stevens Program featured poet Alice Fulton. Fulton read from her poetry on April 22 at the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts in Hartford, and on April 23 at UConn in Storrs. Fulton also presented awards to winners of the annual Stevens poetry contests for high school students (in Hartford) and UConn students (at Storrs). The Program is funded by The Hartford Financial Services Group.

* * *

On a chilly day in Greenwich Village last February, Lawrence Schwartzwald took this photograph of legendary rock singer Patti Smith ("Because the Night"), warming herself with a copy of *The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens*.



Photo © Lawrence Schwartzwald

* * *

The Wallace Stevens Memorial Reading was held in the Pond House of Elizabeth Park, Hartford, on Saturday, June 21, 2008, at 1:00 p.m. Featured poets this year were Richard Deming and Gray Jacobik. This annual event is sponsored by the Hartford Friends and Enemies of Wallace Stevens.

* * *

John N. Serio was the featured speaker at the 13th annual Wallace Stevens Birthday Bash at the Hartford Public Library on Saturday, October 4, 2008. Serio's talk was entitled "Poetry Is Feeling, Then, and Sound." Wine, music, and hors d'oeuvres preceded the program, which was followed by birthday cake and champagne to celebrate Stevens' 129th birthday. The event is sponsored by the Connecticut Center for the Book at the Hartford Public Library and by the Hartford Friends and Enemies of Wallace Stevens.

* * *

Birchbark Bookshop of Potsdam, N.Y., is offering the 1945 Cummington Press edition of *Esthétique du Mal* by Wallace Stevens for \$850. Having quarter black morocco and pinkish Natsume straw paper covered boards, the book, #177 out of 340, is in very good condition. For more information, contact Tim Strong at 315.265.3875 or tstrong@twcny.rr.com.

* * *

Russ MacKechnie reports that the Contemporary Music Festival at Tanglewood in Lenox, Mass., this summer featured works by Elliott Carter, soon to be 100 years old. Among the works performed was his recent *In the Distances of Sleep* (2006), inspired by Wallace Stevens. A review in the *New York Times* highlighted this portion of the program:

Of the vocal scores performed later in the festival, the most compelling was "In the Distances of Sleep" (2006), six refined and at times movingly dramatized Wallace Stevens settings, heard in a ravishing performance by the mezzo-soprano Kate Lindsey on Tuesday [July 22, 2008]. Ms. Lindsey's velvety tone and an intuitively supple phrasing took these pieces straight to the heart. It was a performance likely to have disarmed anyone who still regarded Mr. Carter's writing as harsh or impenetrable. (<<http://www.ny-times.com/2008/07/26/arts/music/26cont.html?ref=arts>>)

* * *

Wallace Stevens books and manuscripts appeared on the market in 2007 in greater numbers than in many years. James Cummins Bookseller offered two rare titles in his November catalog. The first was a copy of the third edition of *The Man With the Blue Guitar* signed by the poet W. S. Merwin (offered for \$1,000). The second was the very rare first edition, second binding (one of 215 copies) of Stevens' first book, *Harmonium*. This copy was inscribed to Earl

Mathews and was priced at \$15,000. James Cummins' December catalog listed a typed note for \$4,000, signed "W. Stevens" to Allen Tate, dated August 27, 1945, discussing plans to get together and mentioning Henry Church. William Reese Company's autumn Catalog 258, offered for \$850 a first edition of *The Auroras of Autumn*. The volume was Monroe Wheeler's copy, with his bookplate, and with a brief Stevens TLS, dated January 11, 1951, tipped in at the front free endpaper. In December, David Schulson Autographs, Ltd., offered a Stevens TLS for \$525, dated June 2, 1948, requesting a catalog for a Swiss exhibition of paintings by Grafen von Liechtenstein.

Sara S. Hodson
The Huntington Library

**Wallace Stevens Seminar
MLA 2008
San Francisco**

Sunday, 28 December 2008
180. Stevens and the Arts
8:30–9:45 a.m., Continental 3, Hilton
Program arranged by the Wallace Stevens Society

Presiding: Anne Luyat, Univ. of Avignon

1. "Intermedial Leaps: Comprehending Stevens through Ned Rorem's Music and Helga Kos's Art," Bart Eeckhout, Univ. of Antwerp
2. "The Intricate Evasions of 'Is' in the Work of Wallace Stevens and Mark Rothko," Cara Lewis, Univ. of Virginia
3. "'The Snow Man' and Chan Art?" Fen Gao, Zhejiang Univ.; Zhaoming Qian, Univ. of New Orleans