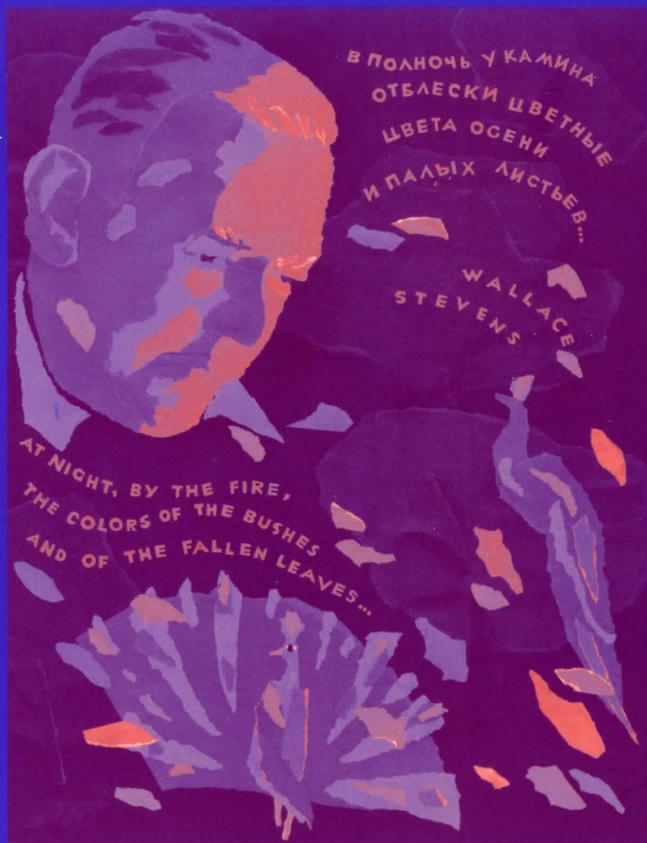


The Wallace Stevens Journal



A Publication of the Wallace Stevens Society

Volume 33

Number 2

Fall 2009

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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.



"A Home Against One's Self": Religious Tradition and Stevens' Architectures of Thought

GARTH GREENWELL

I

ONE IS BESET, ATTEMPTING a discussion of any aspect of Wallace Stevens' thinking about religion, by difficulties that seem everywhere to thwart an adequately scrupulous account. On the one hand, the assertion that Stevens' "final *mundo* . . . offers the austere satisfactions of a 'self' dependent on the pure poetry of the physical world" (Litz vi), while certainly true of a great deal, perhaps most, of Stevens (certainly the Stevens of "Sunday Morning," for instance), fails to account for the poet who could long for the "celestial ease in the heart" of "holiness" and "love,"¹ who so often expressed *dissatisfaction*,² and who asked, in what I read as at least momentary despair, "What good is it that the earth is justified, / That it is complete, that it is an end, / That in itself it is enough?" (388). I cannot hear the question as rhetorical, nor as the expression of a man, in whatever extreme of austerity, satisfied. On the other hand, the efforts of critics such as Charles M. Murphy or Dorothy Judd Hall to direct Stevens toward a final orthodoxy are anything but convincing, whatever their hermeneutic or biographical basis.³ Even critics attempting a *via media* between Yvor Winters' hedonist and Father Hanley's prodigal Christian⁴ seem finally to sanction one or the other view: thus Adalaide Kirby Morris, whose readings of the poems benefit greatly from her attention to biblical genre and who insists throughout her study on Stevens' distance from Christianity conventionally conceived, in speaking of Stevens' "transvaluation of the Christian trinity" makes the poet an Athanasian by another name;⁵ something similar, if subtler, more graceful and more modest, occurs in R. P. Blackmur's discussion of Stevens' "rosary of minor symbols" (215).

The problem, of course, is that Stevens' work provides material for all of these interpretations. He is a thinker wide enough to accommodate contradiction and stands in that American company (one thinks of Emerson and Whitman) for whom contradiction was the spur of fruitful thought, and scholastic consistency a stultifying "primness": "What you don't al-

low for is the fact that one moves in many directions at once. No man of imagination is prim: the thing is a contradiction in terms" (L 300). Too few readers of Stevens take account, in considering his religious thought, of their subject as a man who could write, in letters only three days apart and addressed to the same correspondent, both that "no one believes in the church as an institution more than I do" (L 348) and that "my direct interest is in telling the Archbishop of Canterbury to go jump off the end of the dock" (L 351). It is difficult to synthesize such multitudes. Nor did Stevens concern himself overmuch with their synthesis, resting more easily in his encompassing thought than those who would reduce that thought to a set of propositions: "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); more simply, "One often says contradictory things" (L 798).

The best readers of Stevens have resisted both the urge to recuperate from his work some recognizable orthodoxy and the temptation to divorce him finally from the lure of the transcendent, to make him a hero of earth-bound men celebrating earth-bound fate. Geoffrey Hill's attribution of a "magnificent agnostic faith" (16) to Stevens, and Helen Vendler's deduction in his work of "the tonality of genuine prayer" (341) are scrupulous and just, avoiding both Nathan A. Scott's objection, certainly warranted, that "conventional opinion amongst Stevens' interpreters represents a great disinclination to take him at his word when he forswears any sort of allegiance to atheism" (35) and Eleanor Cook's charge against critics who "assimilate Stevens a shade too easily into the Christian fold" (300).

My hope in this paper is to attempt to tread an equally fine line, the first step of which requires asserting the modesty of my project: I aim to examine a single symbol—architecture—through three poems, each of which adopts a distinct stance in relation to tradition, especially religious tradition, as a source of, or support for, supreme fictions or systems of thought. In the early, minor poem "Architecture," we see the repudiation of tradition, with an accompanying confidence in original creation; in "To an Old Philosopher in Rome," the recovery of tradition, though not *in propria persona*; and in "St. Armorer's Church from the Outside," something that accommodates both tradition and novelty. I consider the poems chronologically, with the unfortunate consequence that they seem to form a neat trajectory, as though Stevens arrived, in the end, at a conclusion with all the certainty of dialectical synthesis. Perhaps he did. But I rather think this an accident, and that other, later poems would have seen Stevens figure his architectures of thought still differently, reversing or further revising his stance. I take seriously Stevens' claim, which enables the variety and adventure and also much of the pathos of his work: "I have no wish to arrive at a conclusion" (L 710).

II

Architectural images—houses, churches, cathedrals, “chastels”—appear frequently in Stevens’ poems,⁶ and seldom are they merely structures of wood or stone; nearly always they bear a crucial metaphoric weight: “Architecture, as the creation of visible order from fragments of reality, became one of his major figures for the act of design or discipline of shaping” (Morris 70). This is true, but does not go quite far enough: frequently, in the poems, architectural space figures not just a designed or shaped thing, but rather an entire system of thought: “Take the moral law and make a nave of it / And from the nave build haunted heaven” (47). In imagining adequate systems of thought, Stevens imagines the structures that will house them, and what he seems repeatedly to pursue is the dream of an inhabitable thought—of “the ultimate politician,” he writes: “He is the final builder of the total building, / The final dreamer of the total dream, / Or will be” (294). Architecture, as a master figure, provides for a number of nuanced particular images: structures come in different kinds, grand and intimate, private and public, civic and domestic, fresh-made and inherited, all of which clothe abstraction in recognizable, affecting forms. In “The Plain Sense of Things,” one of Stevens’ most powerful lines registers the shock of diminishment when what had seemed a grand system suffers deflation, when what was taken to be one kind of architectural space is revealed to be another: “The great structure has become a minor house” (428).

It is the peculiar dilemma of the modern, Stevens often claims, to discover that the structures provided for one’s habitation no longer suffice. (Elsewhere, as in “Owl’s Clover,” Stevens suggests that the cycle of enchantment and disenchantment is universal, as “When younger bodies, because they are younger, rise / And chant the rose-points of their birth, and when / For a little time, again, rose-breasted birds / Sing rose-beliefs” [157].) In “Of Modern Poetry,” the modern artist discovers that “the theatre [is] changed,” that no longer can he merely follow “what / Was in the script,” no longer can he compose in the forms—sonnets, odes, symphonies—once deemed sufficient, or no longer can he conceive of those forms in the accustomed ways; instead, “modern poetry” must “construct a new stage,” its own structure for “what will suffice” (218-19). Each of the poems discussed here concerns itself with the realization of such a structure. “Architecture,” the earliest and slightest of them, is Stevens’ first sustained meditation on architecture as a symbol. In it, he imagines creating his “chastel de chasteté” (66) from scratch, as it were, in a space free from competing structures, exercising an absolute freedom. The effort the poem dramatizes is at once the most confident and the most “bewilder[ed]” (71), as Morris notes, of any of these poems.

Both confidence and confusion are enacted in the poem’s primary formal strategy, its syntax dominated by alternating questions and imperatives

(there are only three sentences and one fragment that are not interrogative or imperative). There is no clear argument, or even obvious organization, to the ordering of the poem's seven parts, which shift between issues of the structure and construction of the building itself ("What manner of building shall we build?" "How shall we hew the sun . . . How carve the violet moon"), and questions of the speech ("what manner of utterance shall there be?"), dress ("And how shall those come vested that come there?"), and character ("Only the lusty and the plenteous") (66–67) of desirable inhabitants. The complete freedom the speaker grants himself in imagining his architecture is as stifling as it is exhilarating; he refuses to sacrifice that freedom by giving his structure any definite shape. His first and largest question, "What manner of building shall we build?" is answered only putatively by the Spenserian "chastel de chasteté," and throughout the poem he re-names his structure, first by suggesting "pensée" as an alternative to "chasteté," then by calling it a "house," "edifice," "building of light," "palace." A fantastic confection of "plinths," "gargoyles," "pillars," "stairs," "towers," "nicks," "portals," "domes," "buttresses," "argentines," and "embossings," it is made not just of stone and marble, but also of the light of both sun and moon and of the lovely "coral air," even of the "sky" (66–67) itself.

The primary function of all of this, it seems clear to me, is play, the "general fantastication of English" (Kermode 12) that provides so much of the aesthetic of *Harmonium*, allowing for nonce, archaic, and outlandish words ("chastel," "dithyramb," "cantilene," "niggling," "cock-tops," "argentines," "chafferer"), rhetorical flourish (the polyptoton and chiasmus of "stone-cutters cutting the stones"), sheer delight in sound ("Gray, gruesome grumblers," "The kremlin of kermess"). The only function of the building itself, the poem suggests, is aesthetic: "which," in what may be the finest moment here, "like a gorgeous palm, / Shall tuft the commonplace." It is certainly true that this aesthetic is on far better display elsewhere in the volume, and that the poem finally fails to control its material, its gaudy proliferations left unfruitful and confusing ("only the lusty" shall be welcome in the "chastel de chasteté"?). It is not difficult to understand why Stevens struck it from the volume's second edition (L 259). But whatever its frustrations, the poem is still important for our discussion, serving as a document of ideal elements of Stevens' ideal structure, at least in an early incarnation. What Stevens attempts to portray is a structure at once solid—stone, marble, gold—and fluid, accommodating of growth and change, inexhaustible in esplanades and flights, and clear as an embodiment of an abstraction, both intellectual ("pensée") and moral ("chasteté"). Movement in the poem is consistently upward and out: "As they climb the stairs . . . As they climb the flights," "Push up the towers," even the "tuft" of the figurative palm conveys a motion of expanse; and the "pouring shafts" (of light?) that "pierce the interior" are balanced by "buttresses of coral air" that pierce the sky. Stevens' structure must be a

space of expansiveness, requiring materials as light as moon and air; and he desires an expansiveness not just of space, but of time: "To the closes / Overlooking whole seasons." It must be vibrant, colorful (especially in the fifth section's wealth of adjectives: "ruddy," "violet," "green-blue," "blue-green," "purple"), and full of organic life: begonias in the penultimate section, but also, via simile, "gaudy . . . tulips" and the "gorgeous palm" (66–67). As we shall see, all of these elements prefigure the "vif," the "dizzle-dazzle of being new / And of becoming" (449), treasured in the chapel of St. Armorer's Church.

But perhaps the most important element of Stevens' structure in "Architecture" is emphasized in the poem's first section: "Never cease to deploy the structure. / Keep the laborers shouldering plinths. / Pass the whole of life earing the clink of the / Chisels of the stone-cutters cutting the stones" (66). "It Must Change," a maturer Stevens will write of his "supreme fiction," and already this ideal is present in his thought: the structure "was to be as expansive as its evolving faith," writes Morris, one of only two critics I have found who discuss this poem (the other is James Baird), "a structure of things which might change with the structure of ideas." But Morris goes on to express her frustration with Stevens' verb here, "deploy": "The development of the idea, however, stops abruptly in the confusing suggestion that we 'never cease to deploy' the building of light but 'pass the whole of life hearing the clink of the / Chisels of the stone-cutters cutting the stones'" (72). Morris seems to think that there are two buildings under discussion here, one of stone and one of air; but what Stevens wants, I think, is *both* solidity and movement, a thing of stone that can nevertheless continuously be "deployed" in the obsolete meaning ("to unfold, display" [OED]) of the word. And Stevens has already committed himself to the avoidance of conclusion: the creation of his *chastel* must occupy "the whole of life"; his house of thought can function only so long as it lives in perpetual construction, perpetual change.

Accommodating and expansive as it is, this *chastel* is conceived at the cost of a grand exclusion, and this exclusion, like the construction it allows, is perpetual, requiring the "guardians" of the poem's end: "For no one proud, nor stiff, / No solemn one, nor pale, / No chafferer, may come / To sully the begonias, nor vex / With holy or sublime ado / The kremlin of kermess" (67). "There is . . . no struggle in [Stevens'] verse with an older kind of orthodoxy which must be shed," writes Ralph J. Mills: "Christianity is simply observed in retrospect" (Mills 43). Yet I take these adjectives—"proud," "stiff," "solemn," "pale" ("Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean" [Swinburne 101])—as well as "holy or sublime ado" to refer precisely to Christianity, or to that inheritance of received structures of which Christianity is perhaps the most vexing part; and it remains a threat, the warding off of which requires constant vigilance. Stevens imagines in this poem, as he does elsewhere, a system that would reject all tradition, making anew and afresh "what will suffice": "The first step toward

a supreme fiction would be to get rid of all existing fictions. A thing stands out in clear air better than it does in soot" (L 431). Readers who wish to attribute to Stevens the strain of strident, autonomous originality that characterizes certain moments of the American imagination (one thinks, again, of passages of Emerson and Whitman) will emphasize such passages.⁷ But rejection is not the only response to tradition Stevens' poems entertain.

III

This is not to deny the frequency with which Stevens dismisses the trappings of traditional religious belief, nor the importance of those dismissals. Early and late, Stevens is intermittently capable of the nonchalance that Mills attributes to his turnings away from orthodoxy. Early, in "Sunday Morning," the vatic, omniscient voice of the poem declares, apparently without anxiety, that "Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her, / Alone, shall come fulfillment to our dreams / And our desires" (55); and one can agree both with Winters in thinking this one of the finest American poems of the century, and with Denis Donoghue, who finds this un compelling and unsympathetic as a response to the legitimate "need of some imperishable bliss" of the poem's protagonist.⁸ Late, in "Two or Three Ideas," Stevens will speak of the exhilarations of disbelief: "To see the gods dispelled in mid-air and dissolve like clouds is one of the great human experiences. . . . It is simply that they came to nothing. . . . [N]o man ever muttered a petition in his heart for the restoration of those unreal shapes" (842). But such statements mix uneasily with Stevens' early cry, expressed in the biblical cadence (and, here, allusion) so crucial to the movements of his mature verse: "I wish that groves still were sacred—or, at least, that something was: that there was still something free from doubt, that day unto day still uttered speech, and night unto night still showed wisdom. I grow tired of the want of faith—the instinct of faith" (L 86). "Believe would be a brother full / Of love, believe would be a friend" (144), he will write in "The Man with the Blue Guitar." Stevens' sometime confident atheism repeatedly gives way to a searching uncertainty: "I am not an atheist although I do not believe to-day in the same God in whom I believed when I was a boy" (L 735), he says; but also: "At my age it would be nice to be able to read more and think more and be myself more and to make up my mind about God, say, before it is too late, or at least before he makes up his mind about me" (L 763). One of the most beautiful passages of one of Stevens' most beautiful poems gives voice to the desire for at least a second-order religious experience, expressed in the terms of traditional devotion ("saint," "holiness," "celestial"):

If it is misery that infuriates our love,
If the black of night stands glistening on beau mont,
Then, ancientest saint ablaze with ancientest truth,

Say next to holiness is the will thereto,
And next to love is the desire for love,
The desire for its celestial ease in the heart,

Which nothing can frustrate, that most secure,
Unlike love in possession of that which was
To be possessed and is. (398)

Whatever the vehemence of his occasional rejections of received religion, Stevens' correspondence shows great respect, and something like admiration, when dealing with believers whose faith he deemed sincere. This is nowhere clearer than in his relations with Tom McGreevey, of whom he wrote, to Barbara Church, "he is addicted to the life of his attic apartment (being a poet) which he can magnify at will by the true praise and prayer that is so vast a part of his being" (*L* 672).

If "Architecture" dramatizes one extreme of Stevens' response to tradition—a response of absolute and vigilant repudiation, insisting on a structure free of the influence of prior structures—his late masterpiece, "To an Old Philosopher in Rome," represents the other: a "realized" (the word is Stevens' own) edifice of the imagination that takes as its form the forms of traditional belief. The *forms* of traditional belief, I should be quick to emphasize, and not the belief itself. Critics have been right to start, in considering the poem, with Stevens' prose comment on George Santayana, from his lecture "Imagination as Value":

Most men's lives are thrust upon them. The existence of aesthetic value in lives that are forced on those that live them is an improbable sort of a thing. There can be lives, nevertheless, which exist by the deliberate choice of those that live them. To use a single illustration: it may be assumed that the life of Professor Santayana is a life in which the function of the imagination has had a function similar to its function in any deliberate work of art or letters. We have only to think of this present phase of it, in which, in his old age, he dwells in the head of the world, in the company of devoted women, in their convent, and in the company of familiar saints, whose presence does so much to make any convent an appropriate refuge for a generous and human philosopher. (733–34)

"In the company of devoted women . . . and in the company of familiar saints"; the fittingness of Santayana's final home is inextricable from the forms of the faith it housed, the faith that compelled Santayana's fascination and thought, whatever his estrangement from it. "Santayana's will to await death in the convent, but without believing, is read by Stevens as a trope of *pathos*" (361), writes Harold Bloom, and yet it seems to me that

the distinction between belief and disbelief is too stark and unnuanced for the proper characterization of the poem and its hero. The poem's primary marvel, in fact, is the rigorous poise it maintains between "credible thought" and "incredible system" (466). A better formulation than Bloom's, it seems to me, is found in Robert Lowell's prose remembrance of the philosopher: "Santayana, a fantastically displaced spirit, Spanish by blood, New England by upbringing, Roman Catholic by birth (inheritance) and even taste, though in belief a pious agnostic" (*Collected Prose* 205). This is an ambivalence beautifully expressed in a line that Lowell, in his poem "For George Santayana," attributes to the philosopher: "There is no God and Mary is His Mother'" (*Collected Poems* 155). This agnostic piety, I think, is precisely the tone struck by Stevens' poem.

"To an Old Philosopher in Rome" could not be further from "Architecture" in the texture of its language and controlled direction of its thought, and there is none of the gaudiness of diction or visual effect here that we saw in the earlier poem (something of it will return in "St. Armorer's Church from the Outside"). Yet the late poem shares with the early work a primary expansiveness—and here, too, it is temporal as well as spatial. The remarkable effect of the opening stanza is one of increasing distance, as the observer of the poem's voice draws telescopically away from "the figures in the street":

On the threshold of heaven, the figures in the street
Become the figures of heaven, the majestic movement
Of men growing small in the distances of space,
Singing, with smaller and still smaller sound,
Unintelligible absolutism and an end— (432)

The effect of withdrawal here is due as much to the pelagic texture of the verse—which echoes words ("heaven . . . heaven," "figures . . . figures," "small . . . smaller . . . smaller") and sounds ("majestic movement / Of men," "space, / Singing, with smaller and still smaller sound") to mesmerizing effect, like a voice retreating down a corridor—as it does to the semantic content of "men growing small in the distances of space." As space expands, from "inch" to "mile," in the next stanza, so too does time, as the syntax swells to accommodate dependent structures, participial and appositive phrases, an expansion furthered both by the dash that punctuates the final stanza and the ellipsis that ends the first line of the third. Of no poem is it more true that Stevens' "thoughts tended to collect in pools, not to surge forward" (Kermode 62). The poem is remarkably impoverished in its verbs, especially given its equally remarkable wealth of nouns, a poverty enabled by the frequent use of parallel syntax and apposition in which reiteration of a verb is elided. More important, for the first seven stanzas, inflected non-copulative verbs appear only as present participles in dependent structures (*growing, singing, tearing*), contribut-

ing to the poem's effect of both suspension and expansion. (There is only one exception, the fifth stanza's "evades"; "change," in the third stanza, is used in a copulative sense: "How easily the blown banners change to wings . . ." [432].)

More striking still, the indicative verbs of the first four stanzas are almost exclusively verbs of transformation: "become" appears four times in the poem's first four stanzas; "change" appears once. (The only other primary verbs in these sentences are iterations of "to be": the impersonal "it is" in the third line of the second stanza and "are" in the last.) The transformations occurring are those effected by passage through "the threshold of heaven," the movement from the finite world of "newsboys' muttering" and "the smell / Of medicine" to the transcendent world of "another murmuring" and "a fragrantness not to be spoiled," the movement between "Rome, and that more merciful Rome / Beyond" (432). A. Walton Litz is of course right to trace Stevens' two Romes to Augustine's City of Man and City of God, but in claiming that Stevens attempts a "secularization" of those concepts he misses, I think, much of the point of the poem, in which Stevens allows himself to entertain an unaccustomed—though not unexampled—credulity (280). "This very late version of an American Sublime," writes Harold Bloom, more accurately than Litz but with emphases different from mine, "represses all of Stevens' naturalism and skepticism" (362). Indeed, throughout the poem Stevens uses a vocabulary resonant with—which is not to say identical with or exclusive to—Christianity: "heaven," "absolution," the explicitly enchanted, almost certainly angelic "wings," "pity," "grandeur," "majesty," "mercy," "mystery." Even where not explicitly or exclusively religious, these are not the terms appropriate to conscious "secularization," and much of the poem's force inheres in its movements between a transcendence consonant with Christian mystery and a more purely "human dignity."

Nowhere is the poem more consonant with the Christian mythos than in its central movement, the seventh through eleventh stanzas, which first address Santayana and present what the poem will call "the tragic accent of the scene." This movement has been prepared for by the previous stanza's final image: "A light on the candle tearing against the wick / To join a hovering excellence, to escape / From fire and be part only of that of which / Fire is the symbol: the celestial possible" (433). "Tearing" and "escape" are the most violent and dynamic words in this poem of great and distinguished calm; they prepare us for what I take as the climax of the poem's experiment in belief. The suddenness of address in the next line comes with a palpable shock: this is the first reference to the addressee of the title, the first hint of a real agent in the scene (the "figures of the street," "newsboys," and "nuns" all keep their distance), and he is addressed not with elegiac propriety but rather with a command: "Speak." The poem makes Santayana representative, not just a surrogate for Stevens, as both Bloom (362) and B. J. Leggett (76) emphasize, but of all men, who must

“feel,” “behold,” and “hear” themselves in him: “Speak,” the poem implores, as the poem inhabits its most expansive syntax, a syntax appropriate to the world of the transcendent,

Of the pity that is the memorial of this room,

So that we feel, in this illumined large,
The veritable small, so that each of us
Beholds himself in you, and hears his voice
In yours, master and commiserable man,
Intent on your particles of nether-do,

Your dozing in the depths of wakefulness,
In the warmth of your bed, at the edge of your chair,
 alive
Yet living in two worlds, impenitent
As to one, and, as to one, most penitent,
Impatient for the grandeur that you need

In so much misery; and yet finding it
Only in misery, the afflatus of ruin,
Profound poetry of the poor and of the dead,
As in the last drop of the deepest blood,
As it falls from the heart and lies there to be seen,

Even as the blood of an empire, it might be,
For a citizen of heaven though still of Rome. (433)

Far from a “secularization” of Augustine’s City of God, this passage approaches theology, exploiting two of the central features of the Christian myth: the Paschal mystery and the paradox of the Beatitudes, both of them invoking the topoi of strength in weakness and wealth in poverty. The first stanza effects, through its result clause, an *analogia* between the transcendent and the finite, the “illumined large” and the “veritable small,” an analogy made possible by the figure of Santayana, who is both “master” and “commiserable man.” (“Commiserable” effects this analogy in miniature; it is a janus word that means both “pitying” and “pitiable.”) In the passage’s most explicit paradox, the “grandeur” needed by the master to bear “so much misery” is found “only in [the] misery” of the “commiserable man,” in “the afflatus of ruin”; as the stanza reaches its end, in the sacrificial image of the “last drop of the deepest blood, / As it falls from the heart and lies there to be seen,” the figure of the philosopher has become very nearly Christ-like. He is “commiserable,” like Christ, pitying us and soliciting our pity, finding a nonsensical grandeur in poverty, a citizen of both the City of God and the City of Man. “The

whole world belongs to me implicitly when I have given it all up' " (qtd. in Leggett 90), writes Santayana, expressing a mystery dear to Christian asceticism. But in emphasizing this aspect of the poem, one does an injustice to the worldliness that permeates even this most transcendent passage, making Stevens seem far more somber than in fact he is here: "Intent on your particles of nether-do" is the poem's single reminder of the *Harmonium* world of diction, and is an odd, and certainly funny, characterization of messianic activity; and throughout, the grandeur of the philosopher is undercut by the fond and moving image of an old man dozing in his chair. If I emphasize the Christic elements in the passage, it is because they seem to me to have gone unnoticed; and there is a great pleasure to be had in Stevens' playfulness—a playfulness that does not preclude pathos and genuine, if agnostic, piety—in balancing and counterpointing the poem's two Romes.

After the philosopher's "loftiest" (though silent) "syllables among loftiest things," after the "naked majesty . . . / Of bird-nest arches and of rain-stained-vaults" (433), the world of the finite—occluded but already emerging in the dilapidated building ornamented by birds' nests and rain stains—reasserts itself in the poem's thirteenth stanza, which interrupts the earlier passage's syntax of transcendence with short, staccato statements, asserting a new texture:

The sounds drift in. The buildings are remembered.
The life of the city never lets go, nor do you
Ever want it to. It is part of the life in your room.
Its domes are the architecture of your bed. (434)

But the poem has not entirely left behind the world of the transcendent, and it ends with a two-stanza coda that embodies that transcendence in architectural images:

It is a kind of total grandeur at the end,
With every visible thing enlarged and yet
No more than a bed, a chair and moving nuns,
The immensest theatre, the pillared porch,
The book and candle in your ambered room,

Total grandeur of a total edifice,
Chosen by an inquisitor of structures
For himself. He stops upon this threshold,
As if the design of all his words takes form
And frame from thinking and is realized. (434)

The achievement of Santayana's "edifice" is a creative act, but not an act of the complete, autonomous freedom on display in "Architecture":

Santayana is not just a maker of structures, but an “inquisitor” of them; he does not just invent, he chooses, and what he has chosen is a structure with an imaginative “grandeur” impossible for the solitary creation of the poet of “Architecture.” It may be that Stevens’ Santayana has assented to a belief, or to a structure of belief, that he has taken a place within it while knowing it to be “false.” In doing so, of course, he has, in a way impossible, on the evidence of the poems, for Stevens himself (and there is a point in the particulars of his assent at which Santayana stops functioning as Stevens’ surrogate), achieved Stevens’ ideal (L 443); and in doing thus he has provided Stevens with an aesthetic effect some readers have missed in his work. Blackmur, an early, acute, and sympathetic reader of Stevens, noted, “Mr. Stevens, like the best of our modern poets, is free master of the fresh and rejoicing tongue of sensibility and fancy and the experience in flush and flux and flower; but he lacks, except for moments, and there, too, resembles his peers, the power of the ‘received,’ objective and authoritative imagination, whether of philosophy, religion, myth, or dramatic symbol” (216). No poem could be safer from such an objection than this.

IV

If “Architecture” represents one extreme of the stances Stevens adopts in his relation to traditional fictions, and “To an Old Philosopher in Rome” the other, it is to be expected that the third poem under discussion here, “St. Armorer’s Church from the Outside,” will take up a position somewhere between them. And so it does. The fantastic construction of “Architecture,” for all its delight, finally fails to sustain; it remains hypothetical; “the purity it exalts”—the purity of pure poetry—“seems finally only a sort of frivolity and preciousness” (Morris 72). The vision of “To an Old Philosopher in Rome,” of accommodation to an existing fiction, while I do not believe Stevens repudiates it, is still unavailable to him; as an inquisitor of structures he cannot but find the traditional church wanting. But “St. Armorer’s Church from the Outside” presents a third possibility: a vibrant, living structure emerging from the embers of one no longer serviceable. Stevens’ “chapel of breath” is not made *ex nihilo* like the palace of “Architecture”; it is able to recuperate something useful from the structures of the past, to make itself out of their form, seeking out “the cold idea hidden in the stale warmth of dead beliefs” (109), as Frank Kermode puts it. Calling into question the assertion of many critics that, as James Baird writes, for Stevens “The poet’s world . . . must be washed clean of old images” (109), here Stevens finds “an ember yes” among the “cindery noes” of outmoded belief.

The first two stanzas, which concern themselves with the ruins of the old church, present some difficulty for the discernment of tone:

St. Armorer’s was once an immense success.
It rose loftily and stood massively; and to lie

In its church-yard, in the province of St. Armorer's,
Fixed one for good in geranium-colored day.

What is left has the foreign smell of plaster,
The closed-in smell of hay. A sumac grows
On the altar, growing toward the lights, inside.
Reverberations leak and lack among holes . . . (448)

Certainly there is something ironic in the first line: to say that a church is an "immense success" is to grant it a purely aesthetic effect—concerts and exhibitions and first books may be "immense successes"; but to state this of the church strips it of metaphorical and metaphysical weight, reduces it to a mere building, unvivified by spiritual *vif*. But I read the final line of the first stanza differently than Morris, who writes, "St. Armorer's, like a stout suit of metal, 'fixed one for good'; in the chapel of breath, on the other hand, one 'walks and does as he lives and likes' " (67). But one ought not read the line without taking into account "geranium-colored day," which I cannot help but take in a positive sense, as something entirely different from a "stout suit of metal," possessing some of the vibrancy and life prized both in "Architecture" and in the later stanzas of the present poem. St. Armorer's *was* a vibrant, sustaining fiction once, possessing both expanse ("it rose") and solidity (it "stood," the same verb used of the chapel in the final stanza), and the opposition drawn is not between the poem's first and last stanzas ("fixed one for good," "walks and does as he lives and likes"), but rather between "geranium-colored day" and "the closed-in smell of hay," both the rhyme and the nearly identical rhythms inviting the comparison. The second stanza presents the church not in its former splendor but in its current dilapidation; yet here, too, there are difficulties. As Morris notes, the symbols of Christianity remain here, however diminished (if they are diminished): the sumac is what has become of Christ's tree, and the *verbum Dei* still rings in the "Reverberations" that "leak and lack among holes . . ." (I am less convinced by Morris' reading of this stanza's "lights" as "The Lord 'that was the true Light, which lighteth every man' " [John 1.9].) Morris construes this all a bit more positively than I: "The symbols of Christianity in St. Armorer's church have receded to their origin, a source from which they can rise once more as sacred syllables" (68). It seems to me likelier that this is the residual "radiance of dead blaze" mentioned in the poem's fourth stanza. The transcendence in "To an Old Philosopher in Rome" was recognizably Christian, I argued; here, the "chapel of breath" would seem to bear a lighter mark of its heritage.

The "chapel of breath" is not a communal endeavor, a structure arrived at over centuries to be approved by an inquisitor; in the third stanza, the poet claims it as his own:

Its chapel rises from Terre Ensevelie,
An ember yes among its cindery noes,
His own: a chapel of breath, an appearance made
For a sign of meaning in the meaningless,

No radiance of dead blaze, but something seen
In a mystic eye, no sign of life but life,
Itself, the presence of the intelligible
In that which is created as its symbol.

It is like a new account of everything old,
Matisse at Vence and a great deal more than that. . . (448)

Two themes are struck here that resonate throughout Stevens' work. The first is the need to find, beneath or beyond critique, something that survives critique: "After the final no there comes a yes / And on that yes the future world depends" (224), he writes in "The Well Dressed Man with a Beard"; in "Esthétique du Mal," he asserts that "under every no / Lay a passion for yes that had never been broken" (282). It is this longing for assertion that makes moving Stevens' restless integrity in critique; his longing to affirm reveals the cost of his negations. The second theme is sounded at the end of the poem's fourth stanza: "no sign of life but life, / Itself, the presence of the intelligible / In that which is created as its symbol." The desire to move from symbol to reality was a motivating force in "To an Old Philosopher in Rome": "To escape / From fire and be part only of that of which / Fire is the symbol: the celestial possible"; this longing returns in "The Sail of Ulysses": "The ancient symbols will be nothing then. / We shall have gone behind the symbols / To that which they symbolized" (464).

"The future must bear within it every past, / Not least the pasts destroyed" (169), writes Stevens in "Owl's Clover," and the chapel of breath provides "a new account of everything old." This poem bears in it aspects recognizable from the two earlier poems examined here: the syntax of expanse from "To an Old Philosopher in Rome" (the periodic syntax throughout, the profusion of present participles in the final stanzas), the dazzling vocabulary of "Architecture," used here with greater discipline ("geranium-colored day," "ruddy-ruby fruits," "this *vif*, this dazzle-dazzle of being new"). It is a summation not just of the history of supreme fictions but, in the textures of its verse, of Stevens' career, evidencing the gaudiness of *Harmonium* and the meditation of the more mature work. The "chapel of breath" shares with its forebears in Stevens' architectural figures an expansiveness, a movement up and out: it "rises" (the verb appears three times) and "spreads out its arches." This expansiveness, as in the earlier poems, extends to time as well as space: the chapel is "That which is always beginning because it is part / Of that which is always

beginning, over and over" (449). Of all of Stevens' structures, it is this in which he takes the greatest delight, claiming it as "his own, his period," the culmination of his architectural imaginings, sufficiently rooted to be solid, expansive enough to obey his injunction to change. It is what will suffice, "final." Final, that is, he is quick to assert, "for him," but with none of the pretensions to permanence mocked by the ruins of St. Armorer's. He recognizes that "Time's given perfections [are] made to seem like less / Than the need of each generation to be itself, / The need to be actual and as it is" (448-49). "For a little time, again, rose-breasted birds / Sing rose-beliefs" (157), bequeathing their perfections, however briefly, to time.

V

"St. Armorer's Church from the Outside" closes with a great deal of confidence, and much has been made of the freedom it claims for its protagonist in its final line. But the freedom comes at a cost: as the poem's title makes clear, the church is observed "from the outside." Finally, the speaker of the poem has no more found an interior here than in Santayana's hospital in Rome. "[I]n projecting a supreme fiction, I cannot imagine anything more fatal than to state it definitely and incautiously," Stevens writes in a late letter; "the last thing in the world I should want to do would be to formulate a system" (*L* 864); and to walk and to do as one lives and likes, it seems to me, is to be without a system. Yet the freedom of the poem's final line precludes, or would seem to preclude, the housedness Stevens longs for elsewhere: "One would have wanted more—more—more— / Some true interior to which to return, / A home against one's self" (469). The promise of system is precisely the promise of such a home, a structure by which to discipline the vagaries of self. Stevens is capable of gorgeous, comforting poems in which he expresses freedom from his anxious quest to find an inhabitable thought, claiming contentment with a more modest "house." A most sublime moment occurs in "A Quiet Normal Life," where the poet finds himself "Here in his house and in his room, / In his chair," in a scene accoutred much like Santayana's chamber, complete with its solitary scholar's candle:

His place, as he sat and as he thought, was not
 In anything that he constructed, so frail,
 So barely lit, so shadowed over and naught,

As, for example, a world in which, like snow,
 He became an inhabitant, obedient
 To gallant notions on the part of cold.

It was here. This was the setting and the time
 Of year. Here in his house and in his room,
 In his chair. . . . (443)

Yet even so beautiful a verse as this offers less than final or invincible comfort, and later still Stevens will find himself haunted by the specter of houselessness, of a figure driven by the inexorability of his own critique to destroy all of his structures, driven finally to the cold sovereignty of a "waste throne": "It is like a critic of God, the world / And human nature, pensively seated / On the waste throne of his own wilderness" (473). I hear in this a genuine fear, and there is a dark motivation, I think, to Stevens' fecundity, his abounding forms. Stevens was driven to the imagination of his structures not just by the pleasures of creation but by the urgencies of existential need; and his "great agnostic faith," his irreverent piety, was compelled by the threat of a desolation he had a name for even in so early a poem as "Poetry Is a Destructive Force": "That's what misery is," he writes there, "Nothing to have at heart" (178).

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Notes

¹Wallace Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 398. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with page number(s) only in parentheses.

²"What I want more than anything else in music, painting, and poetry, in life and in belief is the thrill that I experienced once in the things that no longer thrill me at all (L 604); "How is one able to restore savor to life when life has lost it?" (L 615).

³I find it difficult to agree with Helen Vendler that "any judgment on Stevens's work must find irrelevant those events occurring after it was complete" (80), since the end of so carefully constructed and thought a life must tell us something about the path leading to it, a path marked, in Stevens' case, by the monuments of his verse. But her objections to the report of Stevens' deathbed conversion are just.

⁴See Janet McCann's "A Letter from Father Hanley on Stevens' Conversion to Catholicism."

⁵"Stevens' poetic trinity is a transvaluation of the Christian trinity. In his poetic doctrine, God becomes one with the imagination; Christ becomes the poet-hero, or incarnation of imagination; and the Holy Ghost becomes the active though diffused presence of imagination in human life" (Morris 5).

⁶"Almost literally, his first and last choices as a craftsman were posited upon architecture" (Baird 3).

⁷James Baird, for instance, sees Emerson's "'What is the aboriginal Self, on which a universal reliance may be grounded?'" as "the resounding American question" (67) that Stevens seeks to answer in his poems.

⁸Donoghue complains that the poem, "gorgeous as it is, merely brushes the woman's misgivings aside; there is to be no talk of Jesus, resurrection, or immortality" (191).

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Wallace Stevens' Odious Chords

WILLIAM DORESKI

IN THE NINTH SECTION OF "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," Wallace Stevens invokes a poetic of sound that by appealing to "wild . . . motion" seems to frustrate his calm iambic rhythms. "[V]erses wild with motion, full of din, / Loudened by cries, by clashes"¹ describes an undercurrent in his own work that only gradually and even reluctantly comes to the attentive reader's ear. It comes not only as irruptions in the verse but as a topic, subject, or motif—from the singer of Key West to the red lion roaring its red roar—that preys on the reader's imaginative ear and clashes with the stately movement of Stevens' meditative tone and vowel-heavy syntax. The voice of the poem strikes "attitudes"—a term Stevens associates closely with voice in "Things of August"—that register in the ear with an insistence that shades the rhythms of the poem and resists meditative ease inappropriate to the underlying urgency of Stevens' project. But the ultimate importance of these "odious chords" (14), these non-semantic sounds, lies in the fiction that they are unmediated by the imagination and therefore have a primal relationship to reality.

Although Stevens' aural practice is complex and oblique, in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" he offers a relatively conventional argument about sound in poetry:

The deepening need for words to express our thoughts and feelings which, we are sure, are all the truth that we shall ever experience, having no illusions, makes us listen to words when we hear them, loving them and feeling them, makes us search the sound of them, for a finality, a perfection, an unalterable vibration, which it is only within the power of the acutest poet to give them. . . . [W]ords, above everything else, are, in poetry, sounds. (662–63)

In actual poetic practice, Stevens complicates this unexceptionable argument, conflating natural sounds with speech, reifying undertone as a precondition of speech, deconstructing words and phrases, and most crucially finding "truth" in birdsong and insect chatter devoid of semantic meaning.²

Stevens argues in "A Comment on Meaning in Poetry" that "Things that have their origin in the imagination or in the emotions (poems) very often have meanings that differ in nature from the meanings of things that have their origin in reason" (825). Yet portraying things that originate in the imagination often requires the invocation of things based in reality, since the things of nature enter our lives (and ears) without the mediation of reason. "Certain Phenomena of Sound," for example, opens by cataloging instances that we might think are the negation of human sound. They are actually preconditions, groundings in reality, that frame the possibility of speech or voice mediated by the imagination:

The cricket in the telephone is still.
A geranium withers on the window-sill.

Cat's milk is dry in the saucer. Sunday song
Comes from the beating of the locust's wings. . . . (255)

In the world of this poem such phenomena constitute the basis for the freshening of speech that recreates us daily in our own images (our "names . . . considered speech" [256]) and reinvigorates the relationships among varieties of sound. Clear speech as an occasion of unmediated sound occurs uncommonly in Stevens' poetry, not only because his is an art of non-conversational indirection but also because sound as such often takes the form of the natural expression of "words without meaning" (257) or "shouts and voices" (258) that never resolve into linguistic clarity. Instead they ground us in an unmediated reality that balances the exigencies of the imagination, helping to engender the dialogue between those factors that makes Stevens' poetry possible. In "The Dove in the Belly," for example, Stevens characteristically posits unmediated song as the background noise of "appearance":

The whole of appearance is a toy. For this,
The dove in the belly builds his nest and coos,

Selah, tempestuous bird. (318)

The primal urge "in the belly" grounds perception in natural envisioning: "rivers," "wooden trees," "mountains . . . / Fetched up with snow" (318). The dove in the belly, with its non-semantic cooing, its liturgical pause, its temper, embodies instinct and emotion not readily subject to the mediation of the imagination. Appearance is only the surface of things, and as such is subject to the vagaries and willfulness of the imagination. The dove both underscores and critiques this with its nest building and liturgical cooing.

Sound is both poetics and topic in Stevens. Some poems privilege sound as a subject or erupt sonic irregularities of a kind only occasionally

invoked by serious poets. Characteristically, Stevens deprecated such an approach to his work in a 1935 letter to Ronald Lane Latimer: "I am very much afraid that what you like in my poetry is just the sort of thing that you ought not to like: say, its music or color" (L 297). Despite this admonition, many commentators have written on Stevens' use of sound, but most of them, including me, have dealt with it primarily as music or rhythm.³ This essay concerns itself more with poems that invoke unmusical sounds, either onomatopoeically or nominally. "Metamorphosis" is a brief poem composed of onomatopoeic sound evocations that challenge the reader's expectations of ordinary poetic diction while embodying a process—a metamorphosis—of sound to parallel the muffled transitions of an early autumn rain. But challenging conventional rhetorical expectations is less important than educating the reader's ear in the language of reality:

Yillow, yillow, yillow,
Old worm, my pretty quirk,
How the wind spells out
Sep - tem - ber. . . .

Summer is in bones.
Cock-robin's at Caracas.
Make o, make o, make o,
Oto - otu - bre.

And the rude leaves fall.
The rain falls. The sky
Falls and lies with the worms.
The street lamps

Are those that have been hanged,
Dangling in an illogical
To and to and fro
Fro Niz - nil - imbo. (238–39)

This poem asks how the voices of decline and decay sound and what phonetic elements convey them. Worm, wind, and robin seem to be candidates for those sound acts, but ultimately they are voiced by the imagination, which intercedes by imposing its notions of linguistic reason—making wind and bird say "September" and "October," for instance. A deconstructive act of mocking mimicry conveys through dissection of words such as "October" the illogic of imposing language on natural process, while at the same time calling attention to the birdlike sound of phonemes semantically meaningless in isolation.⁴ Charm and incantation are the rhetorical tags usually applied to the non-semantic use of language in a lyric poem, but they do not seem appropriate to this play-

ful mode. Terms such as “nonsense,” “pre-verbal,” and “mimetic,” and even Northrop Frye’s “babble and doodle” (275) cannot illuminate this linguistic moment, while attempts to depict this language as conventionally representational or onomatopoeic inevitably fail. Instead, this use of sound, as Mervyn Nicholson has argued, is “the stimulating of a certain kind of life/sense-activity” (66).⁵ In this instance, that activity consists of mocking the semantic dimension of words by revealing the primal psychological force of individual phonemes, which is distinct from that of complete words.⁶ For instance, the nonsense phonemes “oto-otu-bre” could be fragments of natural sound hinting at “October,” but with their refusal to form a sensible word or phrase they withhold the sense closure that would ease the transition to “And the rude leaves fall.” The effect is to unname the season, denying it the shorthand of nominal identity and imposing a sense of process that is vocal but not linguistic, reminding us that reality, as such, is independent of the imagination, however much we may require the imagination to normalize natural process for us.

Slight as this poem is, it offers insights central to any exploration of sound in Stevens’ poetry. One notable idea is that words are friable and their individual phonemes can be separated in order to function as something close to pure sound, freed of conventional signifier status (but significant nonetheless). Another is that pure sound critiques or even rebukes not only conventionalized language but also the imagination’s reliance on it. Yet another is that the dissection of words reveals not only the primal quality of phonemes but also the birdsong elegance of the unmoored desire to express. Although verbal expression without semantic meaning may seem pre-lingual, like infant wailing, it accords with Stevens’ desire to explore the uncertain boundary between reality and the imagination. As he argues in the closure of “The Search for Sound Free from Motion,”

The world lives as you live,
Speaks as you speak, a creature that
Repeats its vital words, yet balances
The syllable of a syllable. (241)

Balancing the syllable of a syllable implies paring words to their essences, to the smallest sound unit while repeating—and thus underscoring—“vital words.” Both the parts of words and the whole of words speak of the real world, the one that “lives as you live,” yet the gramophone that earlier in the poem “Parl-parled the West-Indian weather” offers the counter-imaginative proposal that parsing sounds generates the exotica of the imagination, “The many-stanzaed sea, the leaves” (240). Reality and the imagination meet and negotiate when the world is word and sound balances on sound.

Only occasionally, and most often in his earlier work, does Stevens indulge in such parsing of language. More frequently, he relies on eruptions

of rhyme, emphatic rhetorical tactics, interjections in French, or invocations of sound through association or direct appeal to the imagination of the reader. One of the best-known examples of the latter occurs in "The Snow Man," which observes that "One must have a mind of winter"

not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place. . . . (8)

It is certainly difficult to read this passage without hearing that cold wind blowing. The imagination itself prevents us from fully apprehending the "mind of winter," even though we, the listeners in the snow, become nothing ourselves and empathize, through the sound of wind, with the nothing that is both absence and presence—unmediated reality, that is. *Becoming* nothing, however, requires an act of the imagination. The poem evokes a radical act of empathy that would not be possible without an otic appeal to the imagination. Because we have to empathize—that is, interact through the imagination—with reality to experience it, we cannot appreciate it on a wholly primal level, let alone become creatures of unadulterated reality. Although the inhuman "mind of winter" eludes us, the misery of the wind, once that personification presents itself, endows us with a comparably bleak prospect.⁷

A. Walton Litz describes "The Snow Man" as "an affirmation of primary reality" (100), and in agreeing I would argue that this reality seems so basic not only because it occurs in nature but also because the reality-based sounds of nature and the imaginative voices of perception find common ground only deep in the dark of the psyche. Helen Vendler argues that this poem represents an "attempt to numb, while not annihilating, the senses—to continue to see and hear without admitting misery and loss" (47). However, avoiding the numbing of the senses by demonstrating that the "listener" (the reader) cannot help but think of that misery of sound is the otic purpose of the poem.⁸ Acquiring a "mind of winter" may be an act of empathy, but it is a distinctly dehumanizing one. To perceive nothingness as both a presence and an absence is an act of both reality and the imagination. For the listener to be "nothing" indicates the lack of self-distinguished place ("the same bare place"), the lack of a center to his landscape rather than a lack of human capacity. The "sound of the wind" and "sound of the land" are the only moorings in this winter wasteland.

Also in *Harmonium* we find some of Stevens' most distinct uses of rhyme as a means of directly addressing the imagination. "Peter Quince at the Clavier" is not only a poem about music but also a musical performance

shaped in four distinct movements.⁹ It also suggests that the relationship between music and meaningless noise mirrors our own schizophrenic division between the imagination and reality. This quartet reaches its sonic climax in movement three, and perhaps, as Harold Bloom would have it, an erotic climax as well.¹⁰ Although in the first movement the voice of the poem argues that “Music is feeling, then, not sound” (72), that voice belongs to Peter Quince, not Stevens; and reminding us that Quince is a crude product of reality, the poem undermines his argument by unfolding as an exercise in sound rather than music.¹¹

Peter Quince begins his poem in a state of alienation from the music he plays, and his separation of feeling and sound exposes his failure to integrate reality and the imagination. The poem unfolds as an act of sound recovery; it is in the third movement that sounds, by means of heavily reinforced rhymed couplets, expose Susanna’s nakedness and the fragility and beauty of her music (in the fourth movement we learn that “Susanna’s music touched the bawdy strings / Of those white elders; but, escaping / Left only Death’s ironic scraping”):

Soon, with a noise like tambourines,
Came her attendant Byzantines.

They wondered why Susanna cried
Against the elders by her side;

And as they whispered, the refrain
Was like a willow swept by rain.

Anon, their lamps’ uplifted flame
Revealed Susanna and her shame.

And then, the simpering Byzantines
Fled, with a noise like tambourines. (73–74)

That the sounds of the imagination are fragile, drawn from nature (“a willow swept by rain”), defeated by crude reality, and composed of both sound and feeling, is the lesson of the poem, but apparently this remains beyond the understanding of Peter Quince. The heavy rhymes of “Byzantines” and “tambourines” easily drown out the refrain of the “willow swept by rain,” but this whisper of revealed imagination represents only a passing insight, one the dramatic situation cannot maintain. This is an early instance of Stevens’ observation that because too closely linked to narrative, anecdote, and drama, language cannot sustain unmediated acts of the imagination, and even references to pure sound—the tinkling of chimes, the noise of tambourines, the sigh of wind in the willows—cannot elude the hedging and closures of narrative. Parsed words, such as those

in "Metamorphosis," musical syllables, such as "Ti-lill-o!" (9) in "The Ordinary Women" and the "Heavenly labials" (6) of "The Plot Against the Giant," may offer a respite from the crush of linguistic reality, but they cannot sustain a poem.

The process of rediscovering language through the catalyst of arbitrary sound, however, by negotiating between non-linguistic reality and imaginative desire effectively shapes "The Man on the Dump." As the "moon creeps up / To the bubbling of bassoons," its rhythmic accompaniment, although human in origin, is semantically meaningless as sound but significant in its implications: "One sits and beats an old tin can, lard pail. / One beats and beats for that which one believes" (185). Linking non-linguistic, perhaps even non-musical but human-made sound to belief might be construed as a critique, but it is actually an affirmation of the desire to reach, through any available sonic means, the essence of expression. At the dump, objects removed from the cultural and social contexts that lard them with significance reveal their essence. In their disassociated state they become trash; but in the trash heap, a non-contextual place, it becomes possible or even imperative to recover and reinvent expression, beginning with the beating of a tin can and evolving through detached phrases such as "*aptest eve*" and "*Invisible priest*" (186). No wonder one first hears of the truth with the invention of the definite article: "The the." "The Man on the Dump" dramatizes the persistence and ongoing evolution of language even in the midst of rubble, and reveals primal sound and rhythm as the bases of both language and human desire.

Desire is itself a rhetorical construction. In the last section of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," Stevens reconsiders the relationship between the sound and the drama of a poem in such a way as to underscore the emotional imperatives involved. Although Bloom notes that "*An Ordinary Evening* labors to bring experience and seeing together" (311), the opening stanzas of the last canto labor at an even more difficult task—representing sound as matter, as color, and as persons:

The less legible meanings of sounds, the little reds
Not often realized, the lighter words
In the heavy drum of speech, the inner men

Behind the outer shields, the sheets of music
In the strokes of thunder, dead candles at the window
When day comes, fire-foams in the motions of the
sea. . . . (416)

The "less legible meanings" include the little reds, the lighter words, the inner men, sheet music, dead candles, and fire-foams. All of these are lesser elements in larger contexts. The less legible and therefore subtler versions of sound are undertones or unperformed sounds (sheets of mu-

sic), extinguished (dead candles), or auditory hallucinations. But they are also “the edgings and inchings of final form” (417), and despite or because of their indirection lend themselves to the kind of metaphor that in Stevens’ work expresses the finest balancing of the imagination and reality. Presented as similes, these metaphors of “less legible meanings of sounds” conclude Stevens’ most comprehensive attempt to reconcile life and perception by dramatizing natural and cultural moments of fragile temporality. The poem argues that such sound does not inhabit fixed arguments, does not accord with an obdurate reality, but may inhere in the more ineffable qualities of natural expression:

Like an evening evoking the spectrum of violet,
A philosopher practicing scales on his piano,
A woman writing a note and tearing it up.

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

Stevens places a great deal of weight on the “lighter words”; and although “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” would not be his final effort to negotiate between reality and the imagination, it is one of his most sustained and successful late efforts. Stevens expends this effort not to resolve a philosophical abstraction but to enable, as Angus Cleghorn notes, a more fully realized human communication.¹² A central paradox in Stevens’ poetry is that non-semantic sound nearly always seems to precede human communication and provides the necessary background against which that communication occurs. But this is the basic relationship between reality and the imagination: reality, which is primal and difficult to perceive, always precedes metaphor, yet the poem has to invoke metaphor to describe the real, which actually speaks only in nonhuman terms.

Immediately following “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” in *The Auroras of Autumn*, “Things of August” traces human ontogeny from the most primitive of natural perceptions to “The whole man” (421). This poem critiques and affirms to some extent Emerson’s call for an original relation to the world. It is one of Stevens’ most comprehensive statements on the human condition. It argues that evolution centers in sound, develops in obscurity, and expands into not only larger worlds of aural expression but also of the other senses as well. The opening lines parse a distinction in expression that contributes to the development of new or unexplored aspects of the self. As in many other poems, Stevens invokes a sound devoid of semantic meaning but ripe with natural expression:

These locusts by day, these crickets by night
Are the instruments on which to play

Of an old and disused ambit of the soul
Or of a new aspect, bright in discovery— (417)

Although Stevens does not imitate onomatopoeically the noise of locusts and crickets and teases us with the notion that they might be musical, the aspects of the soul to which they appeal are not primarily aural. In describing some of those possible aspects, including sex, “the spirit’s sex” (417), the poem identifies them as matters of attitude and voice. Sex, being a natural function rather than a strictly intellectual or imaginative one, is intimately linked to the insect song: a “honky-tonk out of the somnolent grasses / Is a memorizing, a trying out, to keep” (417). Voice and attitude, embodied in locust and cricket sound, constitute a primal form of expression that, based in the natural spirit of sex, becomes a permanent part of the underlying and developing self.

Voice develops in part II by wielding human concepts to overcome natural limitations. This section argues that even in our most basic states of being (“inside an egg” [417]) we expand our variations through metaphor even of the most basic kind: “Spread sail, we say spread white, spread way” (418). The repetition of “spread sail” as a metaphor of spiritual expansion, the morphing of the phrase into “Spread outward” as escape from the egg, depicts the awakening into self-realization as liberation from too constricted a notion of sky (egg shell, the visibility from inside a well).

Although the effect is not insistently mimetic, the loose couplets of part II feel freer than the quatrains of part I. This formal relaxation suggests the power of metaphor, which liberates the human intellect from reality, but which requires some discipline. Part III breaks into three irregular verse units, looser and yet more constricted in rhythm, as the poem invokes poetry itself—the basic means of disciplining metaphor—as parallel to locust and cricket, day and night:

High poetry and low:
Experience in perihelion
Or in the penumbra of summer night— (418)

The poem has evolved from the primal level of sex and nature to the formalization of speech as an exteriorization of “interior intonations, / The speech of truth in its true solitude” (418), but retains the basic motif of light and dark, high and low, locust and cricket, the basic rhythm of the dyad, iamb, trochee, and spondee.

Yet the works of reality and the imagination are not easily distinguished. The possibility remains that the subject might confuse interior intonations for the world of objects, simply because the latter, “being green and blue, appease him” (418). Reality beguiles by offering an apparent source of happiness, a place of meditation and history, “broken statues standing on the shore” (418). But this metaphor is ambiguous. It represents aesthetic

aspiration, but also its impermanence. The poem continues by exploring through the next six sections various aspects of the relationships among the imagination, aspiration, the life force ("This chorus as of those that wanted to live" [419]), and the difficulty of developing an adequate perspective ("As if on a taller tower / He would be certain to see" [420]). It concludes in part X by invoking a silence in the face of an old and exhausted nature, reminding us that "the ruler of less than men" (422), the silence that overtakes everyone, is always "not here yet" (422) but is always on his way. This apparent rebuke to the evolution that has finally produced "A text of intelligent men" (422) gives reality the last word, but as metaphor, implicated deeply by the imagination. Song gives way to silence, finally, but song and voice and attitude have produced "meanings" that "are our own," "a text that we shall be needing" (422). "Things of August" argues for the primacy of voice in self-realization as clearly as any of Stevens' poems, and that voice is not merely an analogue to the songs of locusts and crickets but is rooted in them, a reminder that although metaphor is a product of the imagination, it is also a negotiation with reality.

To return to "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," the poem with which we began: this is a poem that reminds us in its opening that "'There is not nothing, no, no, never nothing, / Like the clashed edges of two words that kill'" (10). Mocking nature, "'Mother of heaven, regina of the clouds,'" these piled-up negatives—themselves words that kill—generate instant repentance as the speaker poses the possibility that he mocks himself alone. The entire poem unfolds in a tone of mockery that tests and rejects sex in a variety of metaphorical guises. The words that kill—"no, no,'" among others—fail to generate sufficient psychological reality to enforce the imperatives of love, "An ancient aspect touching a new mind" (13). Metaphor after metaphor—from "Shall I uncrumple this much-crumpled thing?" (11) through "This luscious and impeccable fruit of life / Falls" (11) to "the two of us / Washed into rinds by rotting winter rains" (13)—links love and lust to degenerated states of being. The imaginative force of semantically empowered language undermines the emotional imperative behind the poem.

But in that noisy ninth section, Stevens postulates "verses wild with motion, full of din" as the proper medium to "celebrate / The faith of forty, ward of Cupido" (13). Yet having quizzed all sounds, this stanza finally confesses the inadequacy of available "Bravura." Bloom argues that this stanza deconstructs itself, rejecting any advance toward the sublime through sound (42). The speaker, after quizzing "all sounds, all thoughts, all everything," finds nothing "To make oblation fit" (13). In this early moment in his career, Stevens clearly rejects the extremities of sound because they fail to match his lusty reality-charged imaginings (perhaps demonstrating the limitations of onomatopoeia) and he does not want to be one of the "fops of fancy . . . / Spontaneously watering their gritty soils" (13). Fancy is imagination unchecked by a proper relationship with reality. As a "yeoman," an honest worker of the earth, profoundly in touch with the

real, Stevens intends to cultivate the sounds of nature, preserving them as undertones in the complexities of human speech. As he observes in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," "The imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real" (645).

Natural sound, as I have argued, acts as both an inspiration to and check upon the imagination. "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" concludes by acknowledging the delicacy of the relationship between the non-semantic but distinctly colored language of nature and the imaginative language of the emotions. The pigeons we also meet at the end of "Sunday Morning" here also engage in ambiguous geometries of flight that unlike "the nature of mankind" are unavailable to "lordly study" (14). The speaker is forced to confess that humankind also, in an expression of Shakespearean gusto, proves "a gobbet in [his] mincing world." He concludes by admitting that he has pursued, "And still pursue[s], the origin and course / Of love, but until now . . . never knew / That fluttering things have so distinct a shade" (14). The lesson of the pigeons in flight is that the irrational and unpredictable elements of reality, including the voices of the natural world, convey colorations to which we must attend.

However challenging, the cries of birds and other "verses wild" would remain an undercurrent in Stevens' work, emerging now and then in spontaneous sounds. Outbursts of onomatopoeia occur with some regularity throughout the *Collected Poems*, but more characteristically Stevens names rather than depicts the voices of reality. What is most important is that whether presented onomatopoeically, directly or through rhetorical dislocations, or merely invoked, natural voices or attitudes infuse a sense of reality that inspires the imagination in its negotiations with the world. Furthermore, those natural voices must speak to us without the premature intercession of reason. Perhaps this is why Stevens in "Materia Poetica" notes that "The poem reveals itself only to the ignorant man" (917). We must suspend intellect and knowledge, however momentarily, to experience the real and prime the senses before the imagination enters the scene. In the closure of "Sunday Morning," "the quail / Whistle about us their spontaneous cries" (56), demonstrating to the "fops of fancy" (13) the proper use of spontaneity, while the lion that roars at the desert in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" masters the abstract landscape about him, illustrating how the sounds we experience define our place in the world. Stevens' poetics of process test and retest the efficacy of sound. A late example is his invocation of the "gold-feathered bird" of "Of Mere Being," which "Sings in the palm, without human meaning, / Without human feeling, a foreign song" (476). It reminds us that sensation and perception, not reason, make us happy or unhappy, and although the natural and human worlds face a common oblivion, non-semantic voices and "fire-fangled feathers" (477) illuminate as well as fuel the imagination.

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Notes

¹Wallace Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 13. Further references to this source will be cited with page number(s) only in parentheses.

²In Saussurean linguistics, phonemes are necessarily units of meaning, but Stevens is not a Saussurean.

³In 1991, *The Wallace Stevens Journal* devoted an issue, edited by Jacqueline Brogan, to sound. The essays are quite good, but the issue overall concerns itself with the ways in which "Literature constantly aspires to the condition of music" (113), as Sebastian D. G. Knowles notes in the foreword, paraphrasing Walter Pater, or with related mimetic issues.

⁴By "deconstructive" I mean that Stevens' dissection of the word reveals a clash of sonic elements that defeats or at least challenges the inevitability of semantic coherence.

⁵Mervyn Nicholson's "The Slightest Sound Matters': Stevens' Sound Cosmology" is the most interesting and challenging study of sound in Stevens that I have read. I do not agree with all of Nicholson's premises, and disagree with some of his conclusions, but this is an insightful essay nonetheless.

⁶Nicholson argues that Stevens claims "a revelatory power implicit in the words . . . independent of the traditional calculus that makes meaning a correspondence with material objects" (67). True, and this is the most Emersonian aspect of Stevens' poetics. Images, expressed as words, represent spiritual facts, and language, for Stevens, cannot be deconstructed except to expose the life force, or spirit of the language. This is very Transcendentalist, non-Saussurean, but Stevensian nonetheless.

⁷James Longenbach argues that this poem represents a "call for the self to empty out and behold the sheer otherness of commonplace reality" (23), but I think this is typical of the sense-defying way in which this poem has been misread. Rather than suggesting we embrace "reality's stark imperative" (23), I believe this poem presents the chilling impracticality of surrender to that degree of the pressure of reality.

⁸Gyorgyi Voros claims that the purpose of "The Snow Man" is to make available a vision of "the nihilistic void beneath humanist interpretations of the world" (111). I argue, however, that the poem demonstrates that such visions are not directly available to us because of the impossibility of possessing a mind of winter.

⁹Joseph N. Riddel and A. Walton Litz have described the musical movement of "Peter Quince at the Clavier." Litz describes the poem as a dialectical contrast between music's imaginative power and Quince's "lumpy reality," a clash paralleled by the confrontation of Susannah and the Elders (43).

¹⁰Bloom argues that this poem can be read as "an epilogue [to "Sunday Morning"] exposing the repressed eroticism of Stevens' meditation upon his muse, death, and the death of God and the gods" (36).

¹¹Angus Cleghorn reminds us of this by also arguing against Quince's position by noting that "Despite the poet's early denial of music as sound, sound plays a huge role in Stevens' music, as do emotions and thoughts" (87).

¹²Cleghorn argues that in this poem "Stevens acknowledges the need for language to transgress our solitary inarticulate sight in order to communicate with others" (207). I would add that, in the end, Stevens argues that the subtlety of illegible sound expresses itself through metaphors more effective than the beating of drums.

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Dark Muse: Paramour and Encounter in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens

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IN "THE RELATIONS BETWEEN Poetry and Painting," Wallace Stevens writes that "the poet does his job by virtue of an effort of the mind."¹ Stevens' poetry, which is often highly intellectual, demands a similar effort on the part of the reader. For many, it is the riddle-like element in Stevens' work that is most appealing. This high intellectuality has also led, however, to attacks on the poet's humanity. Mark Halliday phrases one such critique: "Stevens earnestly seeks to imply and believe that the solitary self has an ample, good life within reach, and that the absence of distinct other persons is not only undetrimental to this good life but essentially unimportant, if not indeed beneficial" (5). From this viewpoint, Stevens' penchant for framing his poems in the realm of the intellect and the imagination, rather than in a supposed "human" reality of the interpersonal, equates to an elitist unconcern for the rest of humanity. In her *Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen Out of Desire*, Helen Vendler seeks to refute the notion that Stevens believed the solitary self could have a good life. She writes, "Stevens is our great poet of the inexhaustible and exhausting cycle of desire and despair. It should not be necessary to say aloud a truth which seems to me so self-evident. But it is clearly not self-evident to the world of readers" (39–40). However, in her assessment the intellectual design invoked by Stevens to express this "exhausting cycle" is an accident of the poet's nature: "It is understandable that Stevens, a man of chilling reticence, should illustrate his suffering in its largest possible terms" (11). Thus Vendler, although anxious to examine "the poems as something other than a collection of ideas," nonetheless also implicitly agrees that Stevens' poems do not extend in their subject matter beyond the solitary self (4). The theme of Stevens' unconcern for others remains intact.

The project at hand seeks neither to find the odd example where Stevens includes physical, self-sufficient others in his poetry, nor to make excuses for the workings of the intellect. Instead, we will accept as part of Stevens' (the poet's) intent the dearth of fully rendered others in the poetry and the lines' intellectual intensity. Through the analysis of the feminine paramour figure—which Stevens has been accused of rendering as

no more than an “empty cipher” (Brogan 12)—and the thought-process facilitated by this figure, we will interrogate one potential motive behind the absences and strenuous mental challenges for which this poet has been criticized. The exploration of this motive, influenced by a possibility suggested in the work of psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan, may offer a framework for rethinking the polarization of intellectuality and concern for humanity inherent in the aforementioned critiques.

Before considering the paramour, however, it will be useful to frame the discussion by looking briefly at how Stevens conceptualized his relationship with the feminine in his letters to his eventual wife, Elsie, while they were courting. Barbara Fisher describes Stevens’ attitude at the time as “a twinning urge” (105), and J. Donald Blount, who edited *The Contemplated Spouse: The Letters of Wallace Stevens to Elsie*, emphasizes that Stevens “repeatedly said, before their marriage, that he and Elsie were the same person, the same personality” (8). Such an insistence is certainly not unheard of when it comes to the language of love, but it seems that Stevens was particularly intent upon such a conjunction of selves, on “knowing” Elsie completely. In a letter dated December 16, 1908, he writes, “I want to steep myself in you. . . . Suppose we could pass quickly through some gate of the imagination and find ourselves. Yes: we must do that, at once” (116). That the finding of “ourselves” hinges upon a “gate of the imagination” begs the question of whose imagination is at play in the relationship. From the evidence of his own letters, Stevens consistently tries to shape Elsie to suit his imagination’s desire for a twin self. On April 9, 1907, Stevens writes, “Lately I have been wishing for a new photograph of you—one looking at me. This one is looking away, and it makes me want to turn its head, so that I can see all of you, as I sometimes turn your head at home, when you look away” (81). The latter part of this excerpt suggests the sort of control Stevens tried to exert when Elsie did not cooperate with his illusion of dual selves. On March 10, 1907, he describes how Elsie looks in his thoughts, stating, “You are perfectly yourself and that is a little different I think, although not so very much, from the way you are sometimes when we are together” (67). He goes on to add that this may be “the reason for our being easier in our letters than we are—when we are together.” This is perhaps the most painful example of Stevens’ early misreading of Elsie, for here he recognizes the difference between his conception of her and the experience of being with her, yet locates her true self in his ideal. Not surprisingly, once they were married it was no longer possible for him to overwrite Elsie’s “occasional defiances” (71) in their day-to-day existence.

On March 19, 1907, Stevens writes to Elsie, “You must be my poetess and sing me many songs. I shall hear them in strange places and repeat them afterwards as half my own” (72). Their actual relationship, which eventually “declined into a condition of polite estrangement” (Halliday 55), obviously prevented any such development of Elsie as Stevens’ muse. In place of Elsie, it has been argued, Stevens substitutes his creation of the

paramour, “an interior love object” that differs from “the classical muse” in that it does not speak “to or through the poet” because it is already internal (Fisher 55). This suggests that, rather than trying again to subject another human being to his imaginary expectations, Stevens instead creates, as Mary Arensberg observes, a completely fictional entity that he can dominate poetically, a “metaphor for the extra-linguistic source of poetry and a trope of imaginative desire, a ‘fiction that results from feeling,’ that conceals the vacancy from which she rises” (27). Arensberg, taking off from Eric Gould’s concept of “absent metonymy,” describes that which is concealed as “the abyss of origins” (26). Along this line of reasoning, the paramour, created in the absence of a real relationship with another, disguises both this absence and the process of imaginative invention of which she herself is the product. Such a reading has allowed critics such as Halliday to assert that there is a pattern “of consistent failure by Stevens to describe the female other as a fully human individual, as a separate subjectivity, an independent actor and perceiver outside his own mind” (54). This is a “failure,” however, only if one accepts that Stevens is attempting to conceal the absence of the other, “to repress or silence the feminine” (Brogan 12), by speaking for her or—more appropriately for imaginative linguistic generation—speaking her.

Is concealment of “vacancy” and artifice really the task the paramour has been assigned in Stevens’ poetry? In attempting to answer this, we will not deny the designation of the paramour as a muse figure. Nor will we refute this figure’s characteristic descriptive emptiness. Rather, in considering the empty figuration of the paramour, we will examine the intellectual inspirations made possible by such an anti-figure, a project that will implicitly redefine the concept of the “muse.”

The paramour is often associated with darkness in the poetry of *Harmonium*. One reads, for example, of “Night, the female, / Obscure” (59) in “Six Significant Landscapes,” of the “black dress” (58) that the female speaker is embroidering for herself in “Explanation,” or of a “creature of the evening” (6) in “Infanta Marina.” As Fisher indicates, this association is even suggested etymologically by the term *paramour*, which “contains both ‘love’ (-*amour*) and ‘darkness’ (-*moor*),” so that “Stevens’ paramour reveals a shadowy night side as well as a bright” (56). In “O, Florida, Venereal Soil,” the “Virgin” figure is addressed as “Donna, donna, dark” (39). But this latest example also suggests the extreme appropriateness of Fisher’s choice of the verb “reveal” to describe the paramour’s relationship to “shadowy night.”

In the last stanza of “O, Florida, Venereal Soil,” the presumably male speaker commands the female dark, “Conceal yourself or disclose / Fewest things to the lover— / A hand that bears a thick-leaved fruit, / A pungent bloom against your shade” (39). The speaker thus desires that the awareness of the darkness, (dis)embodied by the female, either be completely hidden from him or mediated by the production of some sort of

physical talisman against the female “shade.” That the speaker must issue this order indicates that the paramour figure does not already innately conceal absence (darkness), but instead brings the mind into confrontation with it: “Lasciviously as the wind, / You come tormenting” (38). What is most manifest in this example is the fear of the speaker, not the dominance of the male imagination over the female, and though the speaker issues commands, they are not actualized in the poem. Here we may perhaps appropriate Brogan’s critique of Stevens and localize it in a critique of the male speaker, whose “greatest attempts at poetic expression, the words of that ‘virile poet,’ are instances of failures of speech—words about words he *would* say, if he could” (12). For the female figure does not come to the speaker’s aid in the poem, but instead remains, as Michael Beehler observes, “an other before and beyond determination, an other that exceeds and puts into question the self-sufficiency of the poems’ speakers” (271). The speaker cannot himself bring the “pungent bloom” into the poem, and it is significant that the poem ends immediately after this stay against “shade” is requested, thus hinting that the voice has in fact been overtaken by the female dark.

The foregrounding of this insufficiency in the poem’s speaker, of the way commands actually reflect the dependency of the one who issues them upon his supposed subordinate, suggests that Stevens, having been married for some time now, may be criticizing the sort of naïve attempt at imaginative dominance undertaken in his early letters to Elsie. This possibility, however, has been curiously elided in discussion of Stevens’ paramour poems, with the result that, while many are ready to denounce the emptiness and artifice encountered in his female figures, few are willing to consider that the male presence in the same poems may be just as much or even more heavily constructed by the imagination. Thus, in paramour poems that are not clearly attributable to a character, the mindset of the speaker is most often attributed to Stevens, and hence the consequent criticisms of these mindsets are lodged against him as well. When considering “Two Figures in Dense Violet Night,” an analysis of the poem’s style versus its content may provide evidence of a discrepancy between the speaker’s viewpoint and the poet’s. The third stanza of “Two Figures in Dense Violet Night” is an address by the speaker to an unidentified second: “Speak, even, as if I did not hear you speaking, / But spoke for you perfectly in my thoughts” (69). Read as the voice of Stevens, these lines affirm the complaint that he desires to create an imagined feminine. A starting point for refuting the reading of this poem as an example of phallogocentric scripting of the feminine would be to note that the identity of the speaker is as ambiguous as that of the intended audience. An argument could be made that the speaker is in fact female, as the address is at one point directed to the adjectival-noun “puerile,” stemming from the Latin “puer,” meaning “boy.” However, even if one accepts that the speaker is male, the artificiality of his project is made manifest through Stevens’

repetition of the commands "Speak" and "Say," which prevent the subsequent statements from achieving a successful illusion of authority. Consequently, though the speaker attempts to dictate the speech of the other, the reader's awareness of these commands as constructions undermines the range of his speech, restricting it to imaginary considerations.

The subtle critique of the imagination's limits in *Harmonium*, which operates through a sort of implicit disintegration of the male speaker's power, takes on a new form in Stevens' *Ideas of Order*. We can analyze this development by examining "The Idea of Order at Key West." First, however, let us look at existing interpretations of the role of the female figure in the poem. Brooke Baeten describes the singer on the shore as "a manifestation of the imagination, which has the power to order the chaos of reality, at least within the mind" (25). The paramour is thus a muse or poet figure who translates the pre-linguistic void of the sea (which is described as "ever-hooded") into a positive, creative force able to be conveyed by language. This ordering is then repeated by those who listen to the muse's song: "the power of the singer's song is transferred by its hearers, as a new energy, to the lights of the fishing boats which take on a geographical and magical power over nature" (Vendler 68–69). David La Guardia analyzes this transference as "an allegory of the poetic process, depicting poet, poem, and reader of poem. With the woman as poet and the sea as reality, the narrator as witness becomes a figure for the reader of poems" (61). Thus far, this assessment is perfectly in line with the accusation that Stevens treats the paramour as a device for his imaginative projects; she has come to embody the imagination, an analogy that obviates the possibility of her existence beyond the poet's mind. Even her ability to terrify, which was earlier examined in "O, Florida, Venereal Soil," is lost. She is no longer a symbol of the void, but of the imagination, which mediates the darkness of the void. The attempt at re-imagining her, at writing through her (evidenced in "O, Florida, Venereal Soil" and "Two Figures in Dense Violet Night") is no longer in process, but has already occurred. The explicit commands from the male speakers have ceased. As the sea is determined by the woman's song—"Whatever self it had, became the self / That was her song, for she was the maker" (106)—so too is the female figure's "self" inherently determined by Stevens' poem. It therefore appears that the imagination has achieved total control over the paramour.

Yet there is an emphasis in the narrator's interpretation of the singer that seems to reintroduce the idea of imaginative limitation into the poetics of the paramour. The observer-narrator of the poem realizes, as Janet McCann phrases it, that the singer's "song is like reality, but it is not the same as reality . . . 'the dark voice of the sea' " (31). This distinction is reiterated several times throughout the poem. In the very first line, the singing is described as "beyond" that of the sea. It is then elaborated upon: "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). The cause of the division between the sea (reality) and the singer (imagination) is therefore identified as language: "now, with the introduction of the problem of language, the discrepancy between the two cries, inhuman and human, strikes the poet far more than any similarity" (Vendler 68). Both McCann and Vendler account for this focus on discrepancy by asserting that the realization intensifies the appreciation of the imagination's power, of the song as a created object. This, they argue, is what causes the observer (a stand-in for the reader) to begin to view the world poetically, so that "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" (106).

But there is one movement suggested in the progression of "The Idea of Order at Key West" that is consistently omitted from analysis. Before the poem arrives at the point where its narrator begins to order the world visually, the singer's power to evoke isolation is emphasized: "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). This power to intensify the sense of what vanishes does not originate in the similarity between the sea and her song, for as we have seen the distinction between the two is highlighted several times. Nor does this power come from the sea, for the narrator relates in the first stanza that its cry, though not that of himself and his companion, was "understood" (105). We must therefore look for what change occurs in the narrator's perception of this woman. That she is the "single artificer of the world," interpreted by the above critics as a positive celebration of the imagination's power, becomes, when coupled with the realization that she is alone, an elegy for the loss of an objective world that could be shared by another: "Then we, / As we beheld her striding there alone, / Knew that there never was a world for her / Except the one she sang and, singing, made" (106). There is a real sympathy for this lone figure here, an understanding of the solitary confinement of the imagination, which can create only a world (or a shore) for one to live in. And this sympathy is possible only because the narrator has, on some level, recognized that he is in a similar position. The narration, until this point directed at no one in particular and spoken in the first person plural, acknowledges division for the first time, addresses a singular listener ("Ramon Fernandez"), and refers to itself in singular terms ("tell me").

With this awareness of the solitary nature of imaginative acts, one can apply a modified reading to the mood of the ordering of the world that takes place when the observer and his companion turn "Toward the town" (106) after the song. They see lights from the fishing boats at anchor, and the beautiful description of how these lights organize the scene sweeps the reader up in its creative flurry. Yet behind each light is a solitude, a single boat that traverses the reality of its "portion[]" of the sea alone, and as the "emblazoned zones and fiery poles" are "fix[ed]," so too is the

language of distance. Perhaps it is this underlying sense that creates the slightest hint of vanishing even at the moment that the “Blessed rage for order” is pronounced in the final stanza. Thus, as the imagination overtakes the narrator, his intended audience, Ramon, becomes “pale” to the solitary imagination that cannot contain in itself anything but “ghostlier demarcations” (106).

Halliday writes that “Stevens deliberately ignores or deftly avoids opportunities to consider romantic love as a relationship between two distinct, separately subjective human beings” (44). Given the solitude of the imagination in “The Idea of Order at Key West,” it seems instead that Stevens would deny such opportunities exist at all. Halliday, however, refuses to accept this premise, and asserts that to propose this is a defense mechanism on Stevens’ part: “One way to deal with the discomfort caused by other selves rubbing against one’s own is to assert that such rubbing is an illusion, that contact between persons is ultimately impossible, because the world is meditation” (72). Such a criticism leaves little room for further inquiry into much of Stevens’ most provocative and, by virtue of its lonesome edge, human poetry. In trying to conceive of imaginative solitude as more than simply one man’s aversion to companionship, it will be helpful to contextualize what has just been examined in “The Idea of Order at Key West” with Lacan’s theories concerning love and language.

In *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, Lacan writes, “There’s no such thing as a sexual relationship because one’s jouissance of the Other taken as a body is always inadequate—perverse, on the one hand, insofar as the Other is reduced to object *a*, and crazy and enigmatic, on the other” (144). There is much that could be unpacked from this one sentence, but for our purposes the important points are that there are a “one” and an “Other,” that there can be no sexual relationship between these two, and that the obstacle to such a relationship pertains to the object *a*. The object *a*, in Lacan’s philosophy, is that which one is actually desiring when one thinks he is desiring the “Other”; it is “the object that could satisfy jouissance” (126). What is actually desired is completion—“to be One”—the reunion with a part of the self that is felt to be lost (6). The object *a* is the name Lacan gives to this ambiguous missing part. The subconscious desire to reclaim the object *a* prevents the individual from seeing others for themselves, because perception will always be altered by this desire to become whole. Our approach to the other is overridden by latent concern for the self: “love, in its essence, is narcissistic” (6). Thus the other is transformed, through subconscious imagining, into what one is missing. The “twinning urge” in Stevens’ premarital letters to Elsie is a perfect example of this phenomenon. He repeatedly attempts to coach Elsie to fit his ideal but at the same time believes that he is doing so to make her more herself. As has been demonstrated by re-reading the speakers of “Two Figures in Dense Violet Night” and “O, Florida, Venereal Soil” and by tracing the theme of imaginative solitude in “The Idea of Order at Key

West," Stevens eventually becomes aware of the fiction in which he had been engaging. When Vendler writes, "We are all, throughout our lives, lovers and believers; in Stevens' eyes that means we are all poets of what he called the poetry of the idea. Anyone who singles out, by desire, some one man or woman as a singular valued object, creates by that act a fiction, an idealized image in which desire finds, or thinks to find, its satisfaction" (29), she has effectively paraphrased Lacan. Thus reading in Stevens a Lacanian sensibility, we may be able to offer an answer to Halliday's complaint that there is a contradiction in Stevens between two premises: "the idea of centrality (there is an essence common to all persons, which can be metaphorically imagined as one man, 'a central man' . . .), and the idea of ontological solitude (each person is essentially alone forever)" (74). What resolves this contradiction is the assertion that the "essence common to all persons" is "solitude."

Asserting such an awareness in Stevens rebuts the simplistic claim that he preferred a pleasant, imagined life to the pain of the real world ("Stevens is gripped by the wish that poetry, as a way of life, can eventually smooth away all pain or at least make it thoroughly tolerable" [Halliday 79]). However, if Stevens' dealings with the paramour, as they have been thus far examined, do suggest his consciousness of the limits of the imagination, then his motivation for writing these poems comes into question. If no connection between selves is possible, what stimulates Stevens to write at all? Setting aside the rather masturbatory implications of Halliday's assessment of the role the imagination plays for Stevens, two possible explanations for his persistence in continuing to write after realizing the imagination's limitations present themselves. The first explanation, suggested by Vendler, is that Stevens, though he at times recognizes the limitations of the imagination, is nonetheless still subject to the cycle of vanishing and desire: "no one since Shelley has felt so strongly as Stevens the perpetual vanishing before us of objects of desire and the reformulating energy of the ever-desiring self" (31). A second possible explanation for Stevens' continued participation in the imaginative process requires an investigation into what, if anything, may be achieved by repeatedly demonstrating the exile of the individual imagination from the reality of others.

Lacan, having as we have seen denied the possibility of actual union between the sexes, does at one point suggest a sort of relation made possible by the very interpersonal destitution he had previously outlined. He writes, "For here there is nothing but encounter, the encounter in the partner of symptoms and affects, of everything that marks in each of us the trace of his exile. . . . Isn't that tantamount to saying that it is owing only to the affect that results from this gap that something is encountered?" (145). Here Lacan seems to realize that in elucidating the impossibility of essential human interaction, he has established an essentialism in the exile of each individual from everyone else, in solitude. Therefore, because all

humans are solitary, a sort of fleeting connection is possible if and when the realization of this shared solitude occurs.

If such a movement could be traced in the work of Stevens, a radical reconsideration of the supposed disjunction between intellectuality and concern for humanity (a disjunction inherent in the criticisms of Stevens with which this essay began its exploration) could be effected. Although the emergence of sympathy for the solitary singer described in the earlier analysis of "The Idea of Order at Key West" could also be returned to as evidence of the "encounter" Lacan describes, the focus here will be on one of the later poems from the Stevens canon, "The World as Meditation."

The title of this piece immediately suggests the poet's awareness that he is going to be dealing with imaginative constructions. These constructions, however, do not pertain only to the creation of a female figure, which was at issue in the earlier paramour poems, but also of a male figure, Ulysses. The poem reveals that Penelope has imagined both herself and Ulysses: "She has composed, so long, a self with which to welcome him, / Companion to his self for her, which she imagined, / Two in a deep-founded sheltering, friend and dear friend" (442). And Penelope is aware, from experience, that she may have imagined Ulysses here: "But was it Ulysses? Or was it only the warmth of the sun / On her pillow?" The narrative content of the poem, where the imagined version of Ulysses is inspired by the rising sun and then erased by the realization that this is illusion (and, one could thus infer, has been similarly inspired and dissipated by the rising sun every day that Penelope has been waiting) suggests that the process of imagining the other and then being disillusioned is, as Vendler notes, an inevitable cycle. This cyclical perspective is, of course, reinforced by the invocation of Penelope: "Penelope's web becomes for Stevens the very image of human desire: woven afresh every day, it is unraveled again every evening; and each exhilaration of possession is followed by the despair of disbelief" (Vendler 31). Although the "exhilaration of possession" could perhaps justify a positive reading of "The World as Meditation," this must be balanced by the realization that "It was only day" and that it is a "barbarous strength" (442) that allows Penelope to continue her meditation. In the absence of this barbarity, one could easily imagine the heroine becoming disenchanting like the "bright red woman" of Stevens' earlier poem, "Debris of Life and Mind": "She will listen / And feel that her color is a meditation, / The most gay and yet not so gay as it was" (296).

There is also an element of Lacanian encounter at play, not so much within the narrative of "The World as Meditation," but via the poem's interaction with other poems. By placing the female in control of the imagination here and demonstrating that her act of imagination is no less impaired with regard to approaching the real than the male imagination is, Stevens implies that the female who meditates is in a similar state of isolation as is the male. Thus equality between male and female figures comes, in Stevens' representations, not through any sort of more complete

scripting of the feminine, but rather in the acknowledgment that both male and female evade complete capture in words. This sets up a sort of encounter within the evolution of the paramour as a whole, for here the female other's solitude (one would be hard pressed to find a more lonely female figure than Penelope) is fully realized. Furthermore, in choosing *The Odyssey* for his allusion, Stevens suggests such a reunion is possible. After twenty years of war and journeying the sea, of twists and turns, Ulysses will come home. After years of beginning and then unraveling her work, Penelope's deception will be discovered by the suitors and she will be forced to finish the shroud. Encounter arrives once the "mourning shroud for her mate's father and precursor," symbolizing the death of origins, is completed (Arensberg 41).

It may be argued, however, that even though "The World as Meditation" seems to expose the solitude of the other, it is nonetheless, as a poem, still a scripting of the female paramour by Stevens, that the choice of Penelope, though an apt analogy for the themes of long separation and continuous weaving and unweaving, is still an analogy, and one that carries millennia of cultural and literary expectation with it. The Lacanian encounter, if represented successfully through evidence of the non-interaction of figures, is still captured artificially in a poem. The poet, in other words, does not partake in a wide enough critique to convey his own exile. But is such a critique the responsibility of the poet?

In "The Idea of Order at Key West," it was the narrator, discovering the solitude inherent in the singer's act of creation, who in turn began to see the world in terms of separation, of the possibility of an order necessary for creative activity but also inherently lonely. This second example of ordering was then itself open to analysis by the reader of Stevens' poem, who also interpreted the narrator's "song" as being lonely in addition to creative when it broke from the "We" it began with to indicate a specific separate other, "Ramon Fernandez," and itself, "me." The reader then, by following this progression outward, becomes the narrator relating his analysis of the poem; this analysis, which discusses the inherent loneliness associated with the imagination, will then come under the scrutiny of a second reader, and so on. Awareness of the difference between each "song" and the "real" comes from observation, from the process of reading. This was a notion that Stevens would later express in "Introduction to Samuel French Morse's 'Time of Year'" (1944). Beginning with the question of why "a book of first poems" is of such interest, he writes, "For one thing, it is possible that we are going to have a fresh opportunity to become aware that the people in the world, and the objects in it, and the world as a whole, are not absolute things, but, on the contrary, are the phenomena of perception" (809). Thus Stevens describes one possible benefit of reading in a manner highly consistent with the role we have identified for the paramour throughout this inquiry, as a facilitator of this awareness of the fictionalized nature of the world in which we live.

Perhaps, in this sense, it is only the responsibility of the writer to leave openings for investigations that will generate this awareness. (One could, of course, argue from a Derridean perspective that any writing leaves such openings.) Halliday, who tries somewhat to redeem Stevens from the attacks of detachment that he himself has leveled against the poet, asks, "can we contend that sympathy and virtue and benevolence in Stevens' relation to the reader atone for, or counterbalance, or somehow erase the significance of the drastic meagerness of these qualities in his relation to the sufferers and women and other fellow citizens who so thinly populate his poetry?" (95). Given the reading that has been thus far applied to the paramour, one of these recurring, seemingly "thin" figures, we can now respond to this question by asking whether it is not perhaps based on an artificial distinction. Is it not possible (it is the only possibility from a Lacanian standpoint) that sympathy emanates from the encounter of "meagerness" beyond the self? Is it of greater importance that the poetry depict these figures positively or that it cause an effect in the reader? Again, we may try to read into Stevens for an answer. In his "A Collect of Philosophy" (1951), he writes, "the poet searches for an integration that shall be not so much sufficient in itself as sufficient for some quality that it possesses, such as its insight, its evocative power or its appearance in the eye of the imagination. The philosopher intends his integration to be fateful; the poet intends his to be effective" (862). It is this impulse in Stevens that leads Vendler to describe his work as "poem-as-passage, not the poem-as-discourse" (57). With the possibility of this encounter between the poet and reader in mind, we will now turn to "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour."

Fisher reads "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" positively, writing that it "is the only poem in the canon that resolves in complete sufficiency" and that "the actualization of the paramour makes *Final Soliloquy* a final cause; a complex entity has fully become that which was in it to be" (86). But is this what happens? As was contended about "The World as Meditation," one could argue here as well that "actualization" of the paramour does not really occur. Though the piece is termed a "soliloquy," it is still mediated through Stevens as poet, as is suggested by the use of the first person plural throughout. Fisher seems to acknowledge this fact without exploring it when she writes, "What we understand is that the paramour exists because the poet has given her a place to be. The stanza is her room and the poem her home" (90). The use of the word "interior" in the title also suggests that the paramour exists only as a construct of the poet, though another interpretation of this appellation is also possible when the reader is considered.

The "we," aside from its conventional interpretation as combination of poet and paramour, can also be construed as the combination of the reader and paramour, and hence of the reader and the poet. There are inherent limitations to this interpretation, but they seem to be accounted for

by the details in the poem itself. First, there is the question of time. Each reader who encounters the poem does so at some time after the original act of creation was committed; "Light the first light of evening" (444) is now read long after it was written. Thus it is "as in a room / In which we rest" that this occurs, as opposed to an actual, physical area in which the author and reader are together. The emphasis is on "Here, now" in the fourth stanza and on the characterization of that which joins us as "a single thing." This implies that perhaps after this immediate moment, the subjects will no longer be able to "forget each other and ourselves." The encounter is momentary. Describing that which binds as a "single thing," although suggesting union, is also limiting. This single thing may very well be the poem.

Although the poem seems to be describing the ascendancy of the imagination, there are qualifications and insinuations that undermine the efficacy of the power of creation. After the generative invocation, "Light the first light of evening," which evokes thoughts of the beginning of Genesis, this creation is immediately reduced from occurring in the cosmos to the confines of an imagined room. Also, the claim that it is "for small reason" the subjects of the poem "think / The world imagined is the ultimate good" (444) calls the validity of the entire imaginative project into question. The subjects, in being wrapped up together in a "single thing," are described as "poor." Even the phrase that would seem most explicitly to honor the imaginative faculty—"God and the imagination are one . . ."—is qualified. As Milton Bates notes, "The 'We say' which precedes this proposition . . . signals its status as myth rather than empirical fact or logical deduction" (299–300). The ellipses after this statement further indicate its indefinite status, as though the final decision concerning the truth of the proposition were still pending. When all of this is considered, the "enough" of the final line cannot be accepted as entirely positive, as it may signal both "adequate" and "not ideal." As Beehler writes, "this reductive scene of contact and knowledge may be neither final nor good enough" (275).

"Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" allows the reader to engage in the same questioning of the imaginative power as occurred in the interpretation of "O, Florida, Venereal Soil," "Two Figures in Dense Violet Night," "The Idea of Order at Key West," and "The World as Meditation." In the progression through each of these examples, the reader's encounter with this process has become more directly focused on the critique of the imagination in the poems themselves as opposed to their characters. In "O, Florida, Venereal Soil" and "Two Figures in Dense Violet Night," the inadequacy of the "male" speakers' commands had to be intuited based on their relationship to the Stevens of his early letters and the difficult-to-prove suggestion of implied criticism on the part of the poet. In "The Idea of Order at Key West," the disjunction between the imagination and the real, and the consequent solitude of the individual artificer, was fictionalized as the epiphany of the "male" narrator observing the paramour.

When the narrator began to “make” his own world through the imagination, it was then possible to critique his “ordering” in the same way. This outward shift in the focus of critique could have reached the poem itself, but only if the reader drew the inference that this could be done. In “The World as Meditation,” the title explicitly drew attention to the question of the imagined versus the real. The shift in focus from the earlier poems to a female figure constantly re-imagining a male, and the clear negation of this imagining by the realization that it is only day, placed the reader in the less-mediated position of the narrator in “The Idea of Order at Key West,” thus making a critique of the poem, in this case comprised of un-mediated narration of the female in the act of imagining, easier. Lastly, in “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour” the paramour’s song is the text, and the poet and reader are implicated by the use of “We” in this clearly imagined space, thus prompting analysis. Stevens ultimately arrives at the point where his poetry itself, as it inspires the questioning of the imagination, becomes the stage for a sort of Lacanian encounter between poet and reader. Hence, one could argue that Stevens’ supposedly removed, high intellectualism (in the complex development of the paramour throughout the poems examined) actually facilitates the only sort of true interpersonal connection possible.

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Notes

¹ Wallace Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 744. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with page number(s) only in parentheses.

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The Other *Harmonium*: Toward a Minor Stevens

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TO COMMEMORATE THE 50TH birthday of Wallace Stevens' *Collected Poems* (1954), this journal published an essay in which Marjorie Perloff speculates on how scholars will view the book in 2054, at its centennial. Perloff suggests that critics will have turned from the philosophical hermeneutics that currently dominate Stevens criticism (a strategy focused upon the longer poems, often treating them as essays in verse) to his early work, which anticipates the experimental poetics that appeared later in the century.¹ How might we imagine an approach that fits Perloff's claim?

We can answer this question by constructing a minor Stevens—by isolating that part of his oeuvre that remains outside the territory that contemporary philosophical readings delineate. Unlike Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Kafka*, the minor Stevens may lack immediate political import, but it shares their attempt "to find points of . . . underdevelopment" (27) in a body of language and to take up an oppositional position. One might construct any number of "minor Stevenses" by recuperating considerations suppressed in the major criticism, but this specific minor is the one that recent scholars have excluded most systematically. Nonetheless, I refer to *the* minor Stevens for convenience and, I hope, to prompt debate; it indicates the particular corpus that will found these oppositional readings, without attempting a rigorous taxonomy or derogating the achievement of the poems in question. This deterritorialized approach will emphasize not the major late works, which critics group as the "longer discursive poems" (Olson 111), but the shorter, earlier pieces that less readily yield propositional meanings and metaphysical truth-claims. The minor view will also unsituate Stevens historically, deemphasizing his relation to the "romantic forebears" from whom his "tropes and motifs" (Perloff 243) largely derive and resisting the poet's own ideas about his place in poetical history.²

Although constructing a minor Stevens serves more as an analytic tool than as an alternative selection of Stevens' strongest works, it usefully counters assumptions that have saturated recent Stevens criticism. The minor Stevens thus supplements predominant perspectives by helping us to understand the early poems that critics sometimes read incompletely

because they clash with widespread expectations about Stevens' work. This construction isolates poetic tendencies that Stevens increasingly avoided, but the presence in later poems of attributes identified as minor shows that this counter-canon reveals tensions that are active in the major works as well. After staking out the grounds upon which to construct a minor Stevens, we can mobilize it by showing how the poems themselves confirm the minoritizing strategy's effectiveness.

Poems of the minor Stevens exhibit a form of sublimity that reveals Stevens' resistance to the transcendentalism commonly perceived in his work and used to identify him with his romantic forebears.³ Critics often cite a romantic or a modernist sublime to support claims about Stevens' relation to the romantic tradition; by contrast, the minor Stevens evinces what I will call a non-metaphysical sublimity. This third sublime⁴ emerges through the poetic task of scene-setting, taken as the moment that language no longer uses metaphysical logic to sustain a referential function; when this fails, a recursive departure from grammatical norms figures the paradoxical position of language in a non-metaphysical world. Both of these techniques generate a sublimity that takes pure lack as its referent, as opposed to the positively given metaphysical referent of the other two sublimes. An awareness of linguistic materiality and a deflation of affective intensities index this non-metaphysical sublime, which is easily mistaken for but fundamentally opposed to the romantic and modernist forms critics rely upon when identifying Stevens as a transcendentalist or agonized skeptic. In its refusal to engage in transcendentalism or to mourn the loss of its possibility, this third sublime reveals Stevens' futurity by dissociating him from the romantic past and relating him to more recent American poets. A non-metaphysical aesthetic fuels forms of conceptual play that anticipate John Ashbery, Bob Perelman, and other experimentalists.

Addressing "Earthy Anecdote," the poem that Stevens chose to open *Harmonium* (1923) and *The Collected Poems*, will distinguish the lessons of this third sublime from a more conventional approach:

Every time the bucks went clattering
Over Oklahoma
A firecat bristled in the way.

Wherever they went,
They went clattering,
Until they swerved
In a swift, circular line
To the right,
Because of the firecat.

Or until they swerved
In a swift, circular line

To the left,
Because of the firecat.

The bucks clattered.
The firecat went leaping,
To the right, to the left,
And
Bristled in the way.

Later, the firecat closed his bright eyes
And slept.⁵

Helen Vendler's recent allegorical reading of this poem distills its philosophical significance, a method typical of contemporary Stevens scholarship. Vendler casts the poem as a "parable" (*Hypotheses* 103) for a certain philosophy of mind, reading it as "an enacting of the response of the mind's original inertia when it encounters new hypotheses and then contradictions" (103). The hunted bucks, which swerve only when provoked, represent "a form of uncreative life forced into creativity by the bright-eyed obstacle of intelligence" (103). But extracting such philosophical propositions from "Earthy Anecdote" obscures the poem's resistance to the transcendentalist metaphysics attributed to it.

In particular, Vendler overlooks the aporetic narrative structure generated in the closing lines. Noting that the poem ends "when the firecat sleeps" (103), she represses the extent to which this conclusion conflicts with the poem's previously continuous tense. We have read that the "firecat bristled in the way" not once but "Every time the bucks went clattering," and the ending offers no reason for the interruption of this continuous state of affairs; no explanation is given as to why the firecat rests.

This state of suspended self-contradiction signals the non-metaphysical sublime typical of the minor Stevens. In his *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), Kant calls sublime that "which even to be able to think of demonstrates a faculty of the mind that surpasses every measure of the senses" (134; italics added; boldface in original). Hence, the romantic's confrontation with gigantic mountains indicates the mind's capacity for conceiving infinite magnitude—a faculty "whose preeminence cannot be made intuitive through anything except the inadequacy" (142) of the representation of infiniteness to the very idea that it calls up. Meanwhile the modernist anguishes over the representational limitations that this scenario indicates, painfully aware that only a representation's failure to indicate the supersensible can accomplish such transcendence. But Stevens' third sublime does not follow the familiar Kantian model. As Slavoj Žižek notes in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Kant's sublime "presupposes that the Thing-in-itself," the sublime referent, "exists as something positively given beyond the field of representation" (205). Problematically, "when we determine

the Thing as a transcendent surplus beyond what can be represented, we determine it on the basis . . . of representation" via a metaphysics that cannot think the negativity of the sublime referent. In the third sublime, "there is *nothing* beyond phenomenality," and the "*Thing-in-itself is nothing but this . . . negativity*" (205–06). Seeing the sublime referent as pure negativity dedramatizes the failure of representation. Dedramatization is a variety of aesthetic experience that indicates the draining of affective intensities. In place of sublimity's traditional terror and joy, the non-metaphysical sublime addresses representational failure without emotional gravity, since representations no longer fail to present a positively given metaphysical referent. This affective diminishment replaces the tragedy of representational crisis with a freedom to play with language as a "contingent corporeal leftover" (207). In the minor Stevens, prosodic play and the framing of contingent, non-transcendent scenes reveal that language's failure "to represent the Thing adequately *is inscribed in the phenomenon itself*" (203); we find ourselves "already in the midst of the Thing-in-itself" (205), which is nothing but this self-inadequacy.

In "Earthy Anecdote," this third sublime emerges from aporia and suspended contradictions that trouble the philosophical hermeneutic. The poem's undecided tense effects an interpretative suspension. The opening phrase states that the bucks meet their predator "Every time" they set out, casting the instantaneity of confrontation as continuous. This phrase and stanza four's durative "The bucks clattered" frame the interruptive "Until they swerved" of stanzas two and three, generating indecision between continuousness and instantaneity. Stevens also condenses this static-dynamic paradox in the oxymoronic "swift, circular line"; a circular line is rare, never mind a swift one. Because the firecat "went leaping," he appears non-interruptive, not as the striking intruder that Vendler identifies. The bucks seem always to swerve and not to rely upon the ubiquitous firecat for meaningful direction, so attaching significance to their progress risks arbitrariness.

The poem also frustrates metaphysical interpretation by suffusing its few descriptions with irony, lending them playful arbitrariness instead of cosmic significance. In contrast with the romantics' elaborate loco-description, "Earthy Anecdote" offers merely "Oklahoma" as a setting. Attempting a complete *mise-en-scène* in one word generates a comedy akin to that of the last line, the melodramatic "And slept." Together, these embarrass attempts to say what Oklahoma, bucks, and a firecat have to do with anything beyond the page. Likewise, it seems irrelevant whether the bucks swerve "In a swift, circular line / To the right" or else "In a swift, circular line / To the left"; no matter what their direction, the firecat will bristle before them. Nonetheless, we find ourselves presented with this distinction and seemingly expected to grapple with its difference. Our inability to do so may be mapped upon the predatory encounter's own failure to lead to a kill: in both cases, the hunt lacks a telos, the confrontation a consequence. Similarly, the firecat's main action, bristling, inhibits closure

through contradiction. Although the idiom “to be bristling with” recalls the firecat’s omnipresence, “to bristle” implies a defensive posture inappropriate for a predator. Nevertheless, the noun form (a bristle on a brush or animal hide) connotes toughness and aggression. This condensation of opposed nuances in the poem’s most active word frustrates interpretative completion. “Earthy Anecdote” thus conflates instantaneity with continuousness, aggression with defensiveness, and precision with arbitrariness, generating resistance to the distillation of propositional meaning.

Further evidence of this counter-metaphysical impulse appears in the poem’s closing lines: “Later, the firecat closed his bright eyes / And slept.” If the firecat sleeps, he may have caught a buck and gluttoned himself; but if so the decisive moment of the kill disappears into the blankness between stanzas four and five. Consummation is forced into a zone of vacancy, the gap between lines, making the most narrativistic interpretation a case of suspended desire and affective deflation. Alternatively, if the firecat has given up the hunt, then the bucks have gained freedom; but this conflicts with the continuous tense of stanzas one and four. The conflation of these two contradictory possibilities suggests that what cannot be shown in the poem is literally *nothing*. Whether imagined as an event or the lack of an event, the thing that occasions the transition between stanzas is nothing but the Thing—which is to say, is nothing at all. The poem’s aporetic, de-dramatized narrative leads us to read the sublime referent toward which language reaches as pure lack.

“Earthy Anecdote” thus resists the metaphysics found in the major Stevens, instead returning us to the simple elements of the poem’s scene, gratuitous and inessential for all their specificities. In contrast to what Brett Bourbon calls the “symbolist tradition exemplified by Eliot” (13) and closely affiliated with Stevens—in which iconic imagery comes with a correlative philosophical hermeneutic—the minor Stevens engages in “a poetry of observation,” largely associated with Gertrude Stein and William Carlos Williams, in which “the goal is to get language to be a point of contact with the world” (13). Accordingly, “Earthy Anecdote” offers not a transcendent leap through allegory to metaphysics, but a limitation of our attention to the bare scene as framed on the page. Within this delimited space, we become “obligated by the immediate actual” (Kenner 54), as Hugh Kenner characterizes Williams’ observational style.

Importantly, Bourbon follows Kenner in affiliating observationalism with a concern for what “language is or can be shown to be” (13) in and of itself. The poem’s repetition of phrases activates a form of wordplay not common in Stevens’ longer work. Repetition here drains affective intensity from the poem’s representational failure. Like Stein’s “Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose” (395), these repeated phrases deaden language. This contrasts with Stevens’ more romantically inclined contemporaries such as Dylan Thomas, whose “Do not go gentle into that good night” (18) *gains* affective intensity through reiteration. Unlike Thomas’ refrain,

which provides an affectively charged point of convergence, Stevens' repetitions reinforce that the poem merely says what it says, approaching a non-semantic rhythmicity that also lacks the fervor of a metaphysically engaged chant. Stevens thus addresses the "puzzle of how words relate to reality" (Kenner 81)—which Kenner again affiliates with Williams—by exploring the possibility of an observational middle ground between metaphysicalism and pure linguistic phenomenality. Such explorations generate an aesthetic of surface-effect more akin to the modernisms of Williams and Stein—and to their experimentalist heirs, such as Bob Perelman and Charles Bernstein—than to the transcendentalist romantics.

Recognizing this element of Stevens' work allows us to address the verse's philosophical dimension from a perspective not already credulous to its ambition to make metaphysical truth-claims. As Alain Badiou's *Handbook of Inaesthetics* (2005) suggests, the structure of the third sublime offers a means of reassessing literature's philosophical engagement from its outside. Badiou criticizes conventional aesthetics as a restricted view of "the link between philosophy and art" (8); the romantic aesthetic affiliated with Stevens, for example, holds that "art *alone* is capable of truth" (3), making criticism secondary to the truth-function of the work itself. Badiou instead proposes a view of the art-truth relation as "at once singular" (9), in that art offers truths speakable nowhere else, "and immanent," in that an artwork is "rigorously coextensive with the truths that it generates" (9). The third form of sublimity I identify allows for just such a position. As in "Earthy Anecdote," this sublime refers us to the scene of the poem, rather than to a metaphysical beyond, and thereby avoids making "art into an object for philosophy" (xiv); the referent of the poem's aesthetic effect is unique to and coextensive with the poem itself. Still, the independent existence of a poem as "a producer of truths" has "strictly intraphilosophical effects" (xiv) that the model of a third sublime helps us to understand.

Attaining this new perspective requires resisting the philosophical and historical assumptions that underlie the major terrain of Stevens criticism and that deemphasize Stevens' own attitude toward the poetry-truth relation. Regarding Stevens' own views, as Kenner notes, his prose exhibits "confidence that his poems have paraphrasable content, worth the extracting" (56). In "Adagia" Stevens writes, "Poetry must resist the intelligence almost successfully" (910), thereby suggesting that the philosophical *logos* ultimately encompasses the truths that poetry reveals. But this conflicts with his assertion that "Poetry must be irrational" (919). Indeed, as Simon Critchley observes, Stevens is at his "weakest" (31) when he tries "to talk about poetry in philosophical terms." Critchley's recent *Things Merely Are* (2005) reveals the ineptitude of Stevens' philosophy, compared with that of the thinkers he draws upon. If the consummate poet thus seems a flimsy philosopher, we have Critchley's volume and an essay by Judith Butler, discussed below, as evidence that philosophers nonetheless cannot resist the draw of the poems themselves.

Regarding recent strategies for addressing Stevens' historical emplacement, constructing a minor Stevens both counteracts and reinjects views that underlie many "new historicist" analyses. Stevens' education, his place in the professional class, and any number of other socio-economic factors help to cast him as "the Last Romantic" (Kenner 185), a straggling Victorian who "accepted poetic texture . . . more or less as it came to him from reading" (67), but some recent historicists usefully challenge this view. In *New Deal Modernism* (2000), for example, Michael Szalay traces the "confluence of the poetic and the economic" (142) in Stevens' life as lawyer and poet. Brought into conversation with analyses such as Szalay's, the minor Stevens can supplement new historicist discourse, highlighting how assumptions about Stevens' transcendentalism inhibit a more forward-looking genealogical assessment of his poems. Szalay mounts evidence from the poetry and the birth of Social Security to claim that Stevens addresses the problem of relativism not by a grand metaphysical analysis but by "focusing on objectifications of the social never reducible to any one person's experience" (129), such as the analysis of risk in insurance. By showing that macroeconomics, not metaphysical abstractions, fuel Stevens' approach to "the difficulty of discerning . . . the causes of events" (150), Szalay confirms Stevens' resistance to rarified transcendentalist priorities. By mapping Stevens' fascination with the circulation of money onto his practice of poetry as a "performativity [that] refrains from evaluating the truth or falsity of a given statement" (144), Szalay provides reason to contest the distillation of philosophic truth-claims from Stevens' work. Such historical evidence suggests that a more thorough understanding of Stevens' own socio-historical position would complicate the strong genealogical ties that have bound him to the romantics.

The acceptance of a primarily "philosophical" Stevens has so saturated the critical discourse that it looms behind even the most productive revisions of Stevens' historical emplacement. Though Szalay's analysis offers a historical perspective that confirms the fundamental precepts of the minor Stevens, it also perpetuates the very assumptions about Stevens' romantic atavism that its conclusions call into question. Although Szalay's observation of a "performative aesthetics" (120) opposes reading the poems as philosophical propositions, his conceptualization of this performativity as an "Emersonian dispensation" mitigates the potential that it has to resituate Stevens in the history of American poetry. Likewise, Szalay's characterization of the poems as a "transcendental supplement" (121) to the problems of New Deal economics ratifies seeing the poet as a late romantic. Szalay's one mention of the sublime exemplifies this conundrum. His construal of the roiling sea in "The Idea of Order at Key West" as a "sublime and agentless natural event" (153) fits well with his treatment of risk analysis as a non-metaphysical logic, but in tracing Stevens' "efforts to imagine one mind capable of" orchestrating the poem's scene, Szalay identifies a metaphysical yearning that again affiliates Stevens with the

romantics. Although Szalay shows that Stevens' romantic impulses meaningfully engage with the world of politics and economics, closer attention to Stevens' non-metaphysical dimensions would aid historicist analyses in addressing the poet's futurity.

Critical treatments of Stevens' sublimates likewise perpetuate assumptions about his romantic foundations. As Burton Hatlen notes, treating "the sublime . . . as a static, ahistorical category" (132) implicitly references the romantic tradition within which sublimity was first theorized.⁶ Moreover, reading the sublime as a symptom of historico-aesthetical emplacement leads critics to address Stevens in terms of romanticism. Paul Endo argues that Stevens modifies the Kantian model into a modernist "emergent sublime" (47), thus distancing him from the romantics;⁷ but by citing Stevens' "preserving the undeniable power of [sublime] affect" (36), Endo forestalls any consideration of the dedramatized sublime I propose. Such emphases upon a "postromantic involvement with the sublime" (Eeckhout 92) inflect Stevens' historical situation in a retrospective direction. In contrast to the romantic model and its modernist opposite (Vendler's "false" and "true" sublimates), the third sublime sets Stevens neither in opposition to nor in sympathy with the romantics, but in relation to the questions of linguistic materiality, loss of affect, and non-transcendence affiliated with "Language Poets" including Perelman and others (Jameson 121–25).

We can better understand the function and prevalence of Stevens' non-metaphysical sublime by attending to other early poems that show signs of the minor poetic. The thirteenth poem of *Harmonium*, "Metaphors of a Magnifico," exhibits all of the symptoms of the third sublime, and its divergences from these criteria help us to discern how the minoritizing approach illuminates the many poems that *partially* fit the minor Stevens' precepts. In this poem, the non-metaphysical sublime emerges from a narrative of linguistic inadequacy. The poem's opening movement stages the failure of what its title lauds: language's ability to transcend phenomenal bounds and adhere to metalinguistic referents. This failure causes affective deflation and verbal superficiality. From the poem's beginning, metaphor seems broken:

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

Grammatically foregrounding the *to be* verb in its equating function, this sentence seemingly should qualify as metaphor, but the comparisons fail to implicate anything beyond what the poem describes. The expected referent never appears. This use of a potentially metaphorical form to re-

describe a single vision, instead of indexing something beyond what the words present, calls into question language's ability to reach beyond the page. As Eleanor Cook puts it, despite the poem's use of metaphorical forms "no meta-, no 'beyond' comes" (177). Skepticism about metaphysics thus emerges as a questioning of language's "meta-" potentialities.

Even reading the first stanza philosophically reveals a counter-metaphysical impulse. Bart Eeckhout, for example, argues that the stanza's second and third descriptions of the men represent two different theories of the subject. Dividing the group into "twenty men crossing twenty bridges" offers a "perspectival and particularizing view of things" (236), in which each stands in his own place, and turning the whole group into "one man" shows a mass "deindividualized and taken collectively" (237), like a single-minded mob. Although Eeckhout claims that Stevens seeks a metaphysical resolution to these opposed theories, their proximity to one another highlights how metaphor allows two incompatible figures for the same object to coexist, so any metaphysical ramifications float in suspended contradiction beside their opposites. This tendency toward inconsistency casts doubt on the metaphysical field to which language had seemed to refer. The metaphors fold in upon themselves, referring through over-writing always back to the text itself, never to a stable metaphysical referent.

Confirmation of failed metaphor's collapse into textuality appears in stanza three:

Twenty men crossing a bridge,
Into a village,
Are
Twenty men crossing a bridge
Into a village. (15)

The attempt to transcend linguistic bounds has devolved into redundancy, lacking affective gravity or metaphysical impact. The poem's initial attempt to access a metaphysical referent diminishes into nothing more than the removal of a comma after "bridge." This dwindling of a miniscule difference points up the stanza's approach to superficial self-identity, construed across the solitary "Are" that acts as "the bridge of all metaphor" (Cook 177). This single word functions as a rhetorical turning point that causes metaphor's metaphysics to decline into the inarticulateness of redundancy. The possibility of metaphysical reference devolves into useless tautology. Thus the failure of metaphor figures the absence of metaphysical belief itself.

This non-metaphysical fidelity to the space of the poem heightens our sense of text's materiality. In other words, "Metaphors of a Magnifico" reveals how the failure of language's transcendental function finds as its limit the phenomenal identity of the words themselves, as shapes in ink

or uttered sounds. Metaphor's failure yields a geometrical translation in the near symmetry of the lines. In its failure to make a difference, the disappearing comma appears as a material speck on the page. It "matters" precisely because it does not change the tautological symmetry: in its present absence, it stands out as a material surplus signaling metaphor's collapse.⁸ Stevens here plays with what Bourbon identifies as the materiality of language, associated with the form of modernist experimentalism that prefigures later American poetics by making the poem into an occasion for considering "what language is or can be shown to be" (13). The poem's symmetries—in stanza three and the repetition of "That will not declare itself" (15) in stanzas two and four—again recall Stein's "a rose is a rose is a rose" in their achievement of stillness through a recursive motion. In Stevens' poem as in Stein's, language's self-reference highlights its refusal to gesture beyond itself.

This linguistic (non)event does not follow the dramatic trajectory of a conventional sublimity, with all its joy and terror, but instead diminishes the poem's emotional content. Such affective deflation appears in stanza one: the spectacle of twenty men approaching a village (to ransack or to defend?) dwindles into twenty men on twenty bridges, lacking unitary purpose, then into one man solitarily approaching the civilization into which he may disappear without effect. Despite the potential for arrival, nothing happens in the first stanza, and it happens ever less dramatically. Also, in stanzas two and four, the para-narrative ruminations about "old song / That will not declare itself" (15) trail off into mild disappointment. By contrast, in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Eliot offers a dramatic rendition of the same complaint: "It is impossible to say just what I mean!" (16). The minor Stevens opposes such a harried reaction to linguistic inadequacy. Instead, the "Magnifico" of the poem's title, which Cook identifies "among Stevens' own selves" (178), seems resigned; metaphors fall flat, making their creator not so magnificent. The language of "Metaphors of a Magnifico" thus generates a sublime failure of representation without the affective gravity of metaphysical aspiration.

Despite these counter-metaphysical tendencies, other elements of "Metaphors of a Magnifico" may be read in a manner *opposed* to the precepts of the minor Stevens. This divergence exemplifies how the minoritizing view offers an account of the tensions active in poems that stand on the counter-canon's unstable borders. The poem's resistance to the above reading emerges from its appeal to scene-setting as a linguistic zero-level, a strategy that gains force in the fifth stanza's opening lines:

The boots of the men clump
On the boards of the bridge.
The first white wall of the village
Rises through fruit-trees. (16)

A cluster of evocative nouns, unadorned with abstractions and strung together with passive “function words” (Maeder 104), replaces the preceding tautological knots and para-narrative ruminations: a scene is framed. Inarticulateness brings the poem to a close with the dwindling “The fruit-trees . . .”; linguistic failure thus emerges from and as language’s limitation to the description of a scene, making mimesis the poem’s guiding logic. Because of this effort “to define a scene” (236), Eeckhout sees the poem as “imagistic in intention” (238). This contrasts with the “theses, hypotheses, conjectures, ruminations and aphorisms” (Critchley 15) stressed in the philosophical criticism; and noting Stevens’ latent imagism confirms the similarities to his contemporaries that the philosophical approach underplays. Nonetheless, Eeckhout perceives that “language deployed for the purpose of mimetically representing” (238) a scene functions as “a detour” into the metaphysic of linguistic referentiality. Lacking the aporia and contradiction found in “Earthy Anecdote,” this poem could be read as credulously asserting scene-setting as language’s moment of non-transcendence, thereby offering us an imagistic Stevens in place of a romantic one while still confirming the metaphysical aspirations that he takes from his forebears.

Despite this metaphysically founded appeal to mimesis, the poem’s affective contours remind us of its affinities with the minor Stevens. “Metaphors of a Magnifico” engages in abeyance even as it indulges in scene-setting, for the fulfillment of a framed scene comes in conjunction with the suspension of twenty men in their state of not having reached the village. The village stands always just outside the poem. Represented synecdochically by a “white wall,” it functions as an imaginary destination of suspended desire, an always-receding mirage of the possibility of fulfillment. This lingering possibility does not, however, charge the poem with an affect-laden desire for—or frustration at the failure to achieve—consummation. Instead the tattered para-narrative references an “old song” that holds the least possible draw, as a naiveté to which one might never return:

Of what was I thinking?

So the meaning escapes.

The first white wall of the village . . .

The fruit-trees . . . (16)

Grammatically we see again an anti-propositional draw toward language as such: in the final couplet “no predicates can be found to fix the role of the grammatical subjects,” so the noun phrases “can hardly be said to refer to anything outward or inward that ‘exists’ ” (Maeder 50). The closing lines trail off, indicating not the strain of an “uncompleted intel-

lectual process" (Bruce King, qtd. in Eeckhout 239) so much as the swoon of sensuality abandoning the possibility of its utterance. The "So" might first gloss as "thus," but we can also derive indifferent resignation: "So what if the meaning escapes?" Such distraction anticipates the tone with which Ashbery closes many of his strongest poems. He ends "At North Farm," for instance, with affective non-commitment—ambivalence even about "mixed feelings?" (301)—thereby suspending desire in much the same way that Stevens' bridge-crossers do. This affective parallel expands our sense of what Stevens' influence on Ashbery entails. The closing ellipses of "Metaphors of a Magnifico" also signal a loss of linguistic facility that recalls the end of Williams' "Portrait of a Lady." Here too, skepsis appears as a para-narrative interrogator, asking "Which sky?" (23); and this leads to the final lilting plea, "I said petals from an apple tree"—a similar failure of the retreat to mimesis as language's non-transcendent state. This parallel helps to explain Kenner's claim that Stevens' distain for Williams "is one of the most extraordinary misunderstandings in literary history" (55). Neither poet perceived that he shared this half-serious, admittedly unsustainable nostalgia for a mimetic zero-level of language, nor could either have, since Stevens likely never discerned this aspect of his poetics. Isolating the aspects of Stevens' poetics that the poet himself increasingly avoided resituates him in relation to his contemporaries and offers a narrative of his genealogical futurity—his poetry as absorbed by those whom he influences—instead of a story about his individual development as a poet.

As "Metaphors of a Magnifico" suggests, many of Stevens' poems exhibit traits affiliated with the minor Stevens but do not fit solidly within this counter-canon. Some of the most widely read and anthologized poems, for instance, meet all of the criteria of the minor Stevens, but because of their fame they lack the potential to act as bases for the strongly oppositional readings that constructing a minor seeks. Nevertheless, widespread appreciation of poems such as "The Snow Man" and "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," both of which show signs of a minor poetics, suggests that anthology editors and casual readers have in some sense gotten it right where critics focused upon the longer poems have not. The sheer popularity of poems such as these means that the minor Stevens offers a better sense of which poems should hold center stage in the criticism. More important, the minor Stevens improves our understanding of such poems by elaborating on the poetical impulses that drive them. The lessons of the minor Stevens also improve our understanding of late poems such as "The Man on the Dump," which displays a single prominent symptom of the minor poetic while otherwise holding to the precepts that the minor Stevens opposes. By engaging in a transcendentalist project of philosophical poetics while still exhibiting one salient aspect of the minor canon, such a poem reminds us that the minor Stevens functions as an analytic construct, a necessary staging area for the transformation in critical modes that Perloff predicts. Poems such as "The Man on the Dump" show that the lessons

of the minor Stevens offer a means not only of recentering relatively unconsidered poems for closer critical attention, but also of understanding aspects of the major poems that have eluded critical exploration.

The recursive form of grammatical deviation discussed above appears in several of the later and more famous works. Through structurally similar wordplays, "The Snow Man" presents "the nothing that is" (8); "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" demands that "be be finale of seem" (50); and "The Man on the Dump" defines truth as "The the" (186). Each phrase shows how a sublime moment lacking a positively given metaphysical referent causes language not just to reach its presentational limits but to approach the cessation of semiosis as such. In this way, the minor Stevens' sublime takes the form of a poststructural enigma. Just as the paradoxically meta-linguistic claim that "There is no metalanguage" (Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* 153) simultaneously "materializes its own impossibility" (156) and also "sets up distance from itself" (153), so does the minor Stevens' unique form of grammatical transgression lend language a heightened material superficiality in the same moment that words enunciate their own impossibility as a self-inadequacy. Although "The Man on the Dump" adds this third sublime to the end of an otherwise typical poem, "The Snow Man" and "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" focus directly upon the questions that their grammatical misbehavior raises. They approach the same mode of non-metaphysical sublimity from opposite directions, however. The first casts absence as a form of presence, whereas the latter denies absence altogether.

Both "The Snow Man" and "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" follow a strategy of scene-setting, and this lays a path to the recursive logic that their key lines employ. With the exception of the famous refrain, "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" unfolds in the imperative mood, but the speaker asks little more than that "the lamp affix its beam" (50) on two *tableaux*—one of a secular wake's "concupiscent" liveliness, its "big cigars" and old "news-papers," the other of the "cold . . . and dumb" corpse. As suggested above, such scene-setting brings words near their sublime referential limit, where language presents objects so immediately that it "does not bring to mind any representation" (Žižek 160) but simply *is* what it presents. Similarly, the single sentence of "The Snow Man" unfolds instructions on what "One must have" (8) to bear the cold, but the lines linger on description of the wintry scene:

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is. (8)

Leading precipitously to the resonant closing, the frosty images find interruption only in parallelistic phrases such as “And have been” (which keep the sentence tumbling out) and when “not to think” appears as an initial predicate, prefiguring the depthless negativity embodied in the final phrase. In its failure to refer beyond the scene and its aural sensorium, “Stevens’ copular ‘which is’ sets up a formula that is somehow ‘true’ by its formal structure but may not represent ‘reality’ as a proposition” (Maeder 106). We are irresistibly drawn to the last four words. Even when we encounter “the listener,” the snow man who is the poem’s only persona, we learn that he is “nothing himself” and wonder if he might somehow be “the nothing that is,” standing at the center of the poem’s scene, drawing details toward him as a vacuum might.

The last line’s striking departure from conventional usage, thematically and syntactically the poem’s anchor, generates a non-metaphysical sublime that the standard approaches to this poem do not recognize. Beyond noting that Stevens is “attached to paradoxical logic, especially in the realm of existence” (Vendler, “The Pensive Man” 37), philosophical readings of this conclusion overlook its counter-metaphysical tendencies. Butler rightly notes that the last line attempts a “paradoxical affirmation” (272) of negativity itself by “expand[ing] the repertoire of thereness to include” (273) even nothingness; but she views such affirmations as an earnest “metaphysical enlargement” (280) produced out of the “structure of a metaphysical longing” (269). The poem’s affectively vacant approach to the sublime closing—its voice as “shagged” with cold as the trees themselves—suggests that no longing or nostalgia for metaphysics here persists.

Asking two questions about the closing phrase of “The Snow Man” demonstrates its activation of the third sublime: How can a nothing *be*? How can there be *the* nothing? The first question shows that “the nothing that is” attempts the impossible task of presenting negativity through the positive phenomenality of language—the sublime problem of representing pure lack. As to how *the* nothing can exist, the article prevents reading “nothing” as a metaphysical abstraction; it locates *a certain specific nothing*

in the poem's scene. Hence, Cook rightly notes, "We should beware of changing 'a' or even 'the nothing' to 'nothingness,' a word which comes with portentous metaphysical associations" (49). We may initially follow Cook in thinking that "One 'nothing that is' is obviously the word 'nothing' as it appears on 'the same bare place' " where the reader encounters it, on the page. But this does not resolve the paradox of Stevens' demand for a nothing *right here* in the scene of the poem. To focus on the *graphé* itself—the shape of "nothing" on the page—is simply to transform the nothing into a something. Further, the inky morpheme, a material something, does not signify and thus does not generate the reference to pure lack that fuels the paradox. In more ways than one, then, Stevens' closing line anticipates Jacques Derrida's seemingly paradoxical assertion that "the difference between signified and signifier is *nothing*" (23); as a breach of this non-difference, signification itself seems paradoxical. Hence, "the nothing that is" moves language toward pure non-signifying materiality, but the phrase will never attain to such a state because this movement proceeds from the very referentiality that it cancels. Without the dramatic charge of the romantic poet's brush with linguistic limitations, language slips inexorably away from the metaphysical, toward the pure phenomenality of a wintry scene with an enigmatic nothing at its center. If, as Eeckhout claims, the poem's single sentence "serves as a *pars pro toto* for Stevens' overall syntactic habits" (59), then its ending in such a singular form of paradox confirms the minor Stevens' significance.

Like the closing of "The Snow Man," the divergence from grammatical norms in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" activates a non-metaphysical sublime that produces a surplus sense of language's materiality as well as a trace of the semiosis it challenges. Here too, unconventional usage emerges through the setting of a scene:

Call the roller of big cigars,
 The muscular one, and bid him whip
 In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.
 Let the wenches dawdle in such dress
 As they are used to wear, and let the boys
 Bring flowers in last month's newspapers.
 Let be be finale of seem.
 The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream. (50)

The speaker commands an assembly of personae and props for the perverse funeral rite, prefiguring the penultimate line's request that "the lamp affix its beam" upon a death-chamber that is wholly present before us, for all its tendency to decay. Though most critics acknowledge the poem's dedication to worldly presence, many base this counter-metaphysicalism on metaphysical grounds. For example, reducing the poem to "seeming-versus-being" (Cook 90) casts it as a demand that modernist relativism

resolve somehow to pure being. Viewing the piece as a call for immediacy in place of uncertainty betrays a desire for metaphysical arbitration of the difference between being and seeming. By contrast, attention to the key line and its impact on the rest of the poem yields a durably non-metaphysical reading.

Both in the concepts it deploys and in the structure of its grammatical liberties, the poem warns us against construing it as a demand for metaphysical reconciliation between being and seeming. Stevens figures scopic perspective not as secondary to being, but as the foundation of reality. In its resemblance to the human eye, the "lamp" makes visible the poem's scene, casting vision as simultaneously foundational of and apparent within the scene. Its beam illuminates the ephemeral world of life and the vacant corpse, positing perspective as that which *is* par excellence.⁹ Meanwhile, the seventh line's structure confirms the poem's counter-metaphysical tendency. By clipping the sentence of its particles—the nominalizing *to's* in *to be* and *to seem* and the article *the* before "finale"—the line attempts to replace the metaphysics of linguistic reference with a sense of immediate presence.¹⁰ The line stresses linguistic materiality both aurally and graphically. Omitting the infinitives establishes a prevalence of long *e* sounds and generates a galloping pair of bacchic trimeters, followed by a closing iamb. Meanwhile, the recursive doubling of "be be" lends a sense of redundant frivolity: the line graphically deposits an extraneous "be" as a surplus of its movement toward phenomenal self-identity.¹¹ The repeated verb nonetheless leaves a trace of referentiality in the broken language, for the first "be" still works as the subject of the second's action. Here again, "the verb *to be* . . . heightens the extra-ontological and intralinguistic materiality of the poem's speculative activity" (105), as Maeder notes of "The Snow Man." But in both poems, persisting semiosis complicates attempts to abandon linguistic reference in favor of pure material presence.

Taken together, "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" and "The Snow Man" exemplify the minor Stevens' tendency toward a non-metaphysical sublimity unique to and coextensive with the poems themselves. Their demands for total immediate presence—even of absence itself—generate a linguistic self-inadequacy that confounds attempts to distill a referential, let alone metaphysical, significance. Instead, the words bring us into the presence of a sublime referent, cast as "the nothing that is" precisely embodied in that phrase. Tied to the place and structure of their enunciation, these grammatically unruly sublimities refute the view that Stevens "descends from the sublime to the ordinary" (Vendler, "The False and True Sublimes" 8). The minor Stevens rejects metaphysical yearning by locating the sublime in the ordinary, as "the nothing" in the scene itself.¹² Thus, although their fame prevents locating these two poems within a "minor" canon, the construction of such a canon challenges the tenets of the "major" Stevens as such, and in the process it generates novel readings of even Stevens' most widely appreciated works.

Instances of recursive grammatical play continue to appear in the later poems, offering a hint of how the lessons of a minor Stevens centered in *Harmonium* might impact our understanding of *The Collected Poems* as a whole. For example, *Auroras of Autumn* (1950) contains “A Primitive Like an Orb,” which speaks of “the obscurest as” (378) and of “a large among the smalls” (380); and in *Parts of a World* (1942), Stevens ends “The Man on the Dump” by equating “the truth” with “The the.” This latter case merits special attention:

Is it a philosopher’s honeymoon, one finds
 On the dump? Is it to sit among mattresses of the dead,
 Bottles, pots, shoes and grass and murmur *aptest eve*:
 Is it to hear the blatter of grackles and say
Invisible priest; is it to eject, to pull
 The day to pieces and cry *stanza my stone*?
 Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the. (186)

Thus concludes what had been a heavily metaphorical poem, praising the “purifying change” (185) of metaphor that turns fetid trash into “the janitor’s poems” and “elephant-colorings of tires.” Such propositional verse clashes with the minor Stevens. In this closing movement, the “philosopher’s honeymoon” may indicate an ideal marriage, through metaphor, of abstract metaphysical thought to the down-to-earth stuff of the dump, or else it may suggest the naiveté that leads a philosophical poet to think such a union sustainable. In any case, metaphoric abstraction continues, casting the transformer of the dump as an “*Invisible priest*”—likely the poet himself—while the poetic “*stanza*” becomes a “*stone*” that connotes both a sacrificial altar and a rock of ages.¹³ At the conclusion, however, Stevens addresses the source of “the truth” that lies deep beneath the solace of metaphor by citing language’s own deictic function, isolated in “The the.” This phrase’s circular self-reference closely resembles the Old Testament’s “I AM THAT I AM” (KJV, Exod. 3:14), cited as God’s response when Moses asks his name. As such, it recalls Žižek’s introducing the third sublime with an analysis of “the Jewish religion of Sublimity” (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 201); association with the Hebraic God’s similar form of grammatical misbehavior thus supports the presence of this sublimity. This third sublime intervenes in the poem’s extended praise of a transformational metaphors that, as we have seen, relies upon metaphysical faith to make philosophical claims. Just as this final phrase tacks a contrarian coda onto an otherwise typically romanticist poem, so does the minor Stevens intervene in our understanding of Stevens’ overall corpus, challenging entrenched assumptions and illuminating neglected corners.

The construction of a minor Stevens thus provides an effective means of addressing Stevens’ legacy without perpetuating the prevalent emphasis on his relation to his romantic forebears. Many of Stevens’ shorter, earlier

works exhibit a non-metaphysical form of sublimity that contrasts with the romantic and modernist sublimes used to entrench his retrospective situation in poetical history. Adopting a mode of aesthetic analysis that remains true to the space of the poem itself has helped to avoid importing expectations about Stevens' metaphysical leanings. The minoritized perspective identifies a contrary tendency in Stevens' shorter, earlier works and indicates the possibility of a more thorough study of how such tendencies diminish and persevere in the later, longer poems that have garnered more critical attention. A reassessment of Stevens' socio-historical situation and his reception by poets who cite him as an influence could more completely trace the minor Stevens' significance. The affinities that I have identified between Stevens' early work and the experimental modes of more recent American poets suggests that Perloff rightly anticipates increased critical attention to the short poems of *Harmonium*, where Stevens' impact upon contemporary poetry emerges most clearly.

As the poems on this counter-canon's borderlines indicate, the minorizing strategy provisionally isolates a poetical strain that never appears in perfect isolation from Stevens' "major" praxis. The minor Stevens serves as a staging-ground for the oppositional approach needed to evaluate Perloff's claims about Stevens' futurity. In its encounters with the metaphysical poetics it contests, it functions as a hinge on which to turn the dominant viewpoint, opening unexpected interpretations and new genealogical affinities. By identifying the tensions between transcendentalism and non-metaphysical conceptualism that persist in even the latest poems, the minor Stevens addresses latent aspects of Stevens' most appreciated work and offers new reasons for returning to the "minor" poems. Such a return shows that Stevens' early verse anticipates much of the poetic landscape currently unfolding in his wake, and it makes him more available to contemporary critics and casual readers alike.

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Notes

I would like to thank Oren Izenberg, Matthias Regan, James Eli Adams, and Christopher Nealon for their generous assistance at various stages in the development of this article.

¹The prime exemplars of the method that Perloff resists are Helen Vendler's *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems* and Harold Bloom's *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*.

²Stevens contrasted poetry and philosophy, but recent historicist work notes the richness of his philosophical education and his belief that his poems offer philosophical insights. Recent philosophical readings, however, reveal an inconsistent and flimsy philosophical system, indicating the need for an alternative approach. See Simon Critchley; Marie Borroff; and Stevens, "A Collect of Philosophy" (850–67).

³Critics affiliate Stevens most closely with Emerson, though similarities to Whitman, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and many other romantics have been noted. See Mutlu

Blasing, *American Poetry: The Rhetoric of Its Forms*, for a compelling elaboration of the connection with Emerson.

⁴The vogue of identifying “new” sublimes (such as the contemporary, the American, or the technological) may cast doubt on my description of *the* third sublime, but these projects often misread the context from which their concept emerges. The sublime describes a structure of possibility and limitation, whether on the side of the reader (as cognitive or affective structure) or that of the artwork (representational structure). Beyond Kant’s minimal notion of *quantitas*, it lacks anythetic or semantic predication qualifiable as “content.” To speak of one or another type of sublimity, differentiated in terms other than affective or representational structure, ignores the register upon which its heuristic function unfolds within aesthetics. My third sublime notes structural shifts that include the waning of affect, rather than terror and joy, and fidelity to poetic materialities, rather than end-runs around that problem. It thus stands beside the romantic and modernist sublimines and should not be aligned with the broader panoply of adjectival sublimines.

⁵Wallace Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 3. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with the page number(s) only in parentheses.

⁶Philosophers cite a first-century Greek fragment attributed to Longinus as the earliest writing about the sublime, but no substantial theory of sublimity appeared until the birth of modern aesthetics in eighteenth-century Germany.

⁷Hatlen also traces Stevens’ “shift from the . . . transcendental sublime to what [he calls] the modernist or immanent sublime” (132).

⁸Even reading the comma discursively, as a signal of hesitation, lends a sense of solidification; its disappearance turns “Twenty men crossing a bridge / Into a village” into a single phrase unbroken by thoughtful pauses. A similar effect appears in the closing lines of the first stanza.

⁹See Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 23–26.

¹⁰The absence of *to*’s also casts “Let” in an auxiliary function that it normally does not have. Viewing “Let” as an auxiliary lends the imperative mood a greater sense of dispensation and obligation—as “I can go” or “He should stay”—and this fits well with the possibility that the poem’s speaker is a god delivering instructions from the very metaphysical height that the poem seeks to undo.

¹¹Intuitive justification for reading the second “be” as graphical surplus comes even as one types the line, for most word-processing programs will flag it as accidental repetition.

¹²Liesl Olson anticipates this point, though she does not apply it to the early poems (113).

¹³Appropriately, “stanza” itself comes from the Latin for “stand.” This emphasizes poetry as a means of spiritual endurance and also suggests reading the phrase as a demand: “Stand fast, my stanzas, as durable solace.”

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Uncorrected Errors in *Letters of Wallace Stevens*

CHRIS BEYERS

AFTER ALFRED A. KNOPF, Inc., published *Letters of Wallace Stevens* in 1966, Holly Stevens, the poet's daughter and editor of *Letters*, began to notice problems with the text. Over the next four years, she alerted editors at the publishing firm to errors that she hoped would be emended in future editions. In 1970, shortly before the volume of correspondence was to be reprinted, she wrote a letter to Herbert Weinstock, a consulting editor at Knopf (and Wallace Stevens' main editor), reiterating the errors she had found previously and identifying new ones. There were twenty-three mistakes in all.

September 14, 1970

Dear Herbert:

Here's a rundown on changes for LETTERS, some of which have already been reported to Regina Ryan [Weinstock's assistant] (though I've lost the record of which ones, temporarily).

- p. 62, line 12 – after “quiet!” insert [. . .] before “. . . roads”
- p. 120 – add footnote re “Where morn. . . ” as follows: See William Butler Yeats, “The Lake Isle of Innisfree, lines 7 and 8.
- p. 161, middle – “I look notes” should be “I took notes”
- p. 232, letter to H. Monroe, line 7 – insert another period. It should read “through. . Knopf”
- p. 292, line 13 – “way” before MR. BURNSHAW should be “why”
- p. 360, middle – “Organization: “See answer to [III]” should have IV instead of III
- p. 425 (You said this is done) – add at bottom of page “Everyone feels this when first”
- p. 438, 12th line up from bottom – “clouds” should be “chords” (This was a big goof on my part)
- p. 445 – insert phrase at end of first sentence within parentheses at end of letter #479. The full sentence should read: “How he ever became a Canon is the real problem or part of the general

- problem." (If this cannot be done, [. . .] should be inserted to indicate the omission of "or part of the general problem."
- p. 476, middle – "by eyesight" should be "my eyesight"
- p. 541, footnote – "BERTRAUT" should be "VERTRAUT"
- p. 596, footnote 2 – change to read: Mythes et Portraits, p. 112
- p. 607, last line of letter #659 – "paseed" should be "passed"
- p. 872—add footnote re "Il faut tenter vivre" to read: See Paul Valéry, "Cimetière Marin"

In the introduction, p. xii, I'd like to add a footnote referring to Centre Avenue, which would refer to and quote Dad's letter to you of 1/27/50. I'll give you the wording on this whenever it can be accomplished.

Index Corrections:

- p. i – "Americians" should be "Americans"
- p. ii – under "Asides on the Oboe" 778 should be 778 n.
- p. iii – add new entry: Biscayne Bay, 192 n.
- p. xiv – the last entry under "Harvard University Law School" (p. 736), should not be there. 736 should be inserted in the entries for "Harvard University"
- p. xix – after "Liddell and Scott" change (publishers) to (editors)
- p. xxv – under entries for "Owl's Clover", delete "s" from "poems" so that it will read see also individual poem titles
- p. xxvi – there is a reference on p. 463 to "Paterian hedonism." Would it be correct to add that page reference under Pater, Walter?
- p. ii: The entries relating to Auroras of Autumn are confused. P. 19 should be under book title, not poem title. Under poem title, 571 should be 571 n. and 819 should be 819 n.

After all that, it's a relief to say how much I enjoyed seeing you last week: it was a wonderful day, and I hope you'll tell Bill when he returns what an occasion it was for me. And I really appreciated your coming in on an off day. With all best, always,

Yours,
Holly
(Miss) Holly Stevens

Herbert Weinstock, Editor
Alfred A. Knopf Inc.

There are two errors in the letter: Holly Stevens forgot to close the quotation marks on the quotation for p. 120; for the correction on p. xix, the text of *Letters* actually reads "publisher," singular.

Holly Stevens was told that the exigencies of publishing made it unlikely that all the emendations would be made. Weinstock wrote her the next day to say, "I am very doubtful about the possibility of adding new

footnotes." She seems to have acquiesced to this. Knopf's correspondence files for Wallace and Holly Stevens (housed in the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin) are incomplete, but a letter dated September 21, 1970, from Holly Stevens to Weinstock, reads in part,

Many thanks for the Xerox of Dad's letter. And for your note in response to my letter with the changes desirable in LETTERS. While, when sending it, I hoped all could be included, I understand the problems and also had in mind just the matter of getting things on the record.

Neither the note she received from Weinstock, nor the photocopy she refers to, is in the publisher's files. Still, it seems likely that she is talking about a letter from Stevens to Weinstock, dated January 27, 1950, which she mentions in her list of corrections and which she alludes to in her "Notes on the Editing" in *Letters* (xiv). Not collected in *Letters*, the letter relates to a number of issues that came up in the proofreading of Stevens' book *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950). Although Stevens had previously proofread his own manuscripts, he was busy and was disinclined to do so for that volume. Alfred Knopf suggested Raymond Preston to do the proofreading, and Stevens agreed. Preston, noticing that some poems used the American spelling *center* and others the British *centre*, had asked which was the preferred spelling. Stevens replied:

Center is correct. One of the principal streets in the place where I came from is called Centre Avenue. I have never quite been able to shake that off. (WAS 3305)

This letter has wide-ranging implications for the editing of Stevens' poems, as it suggests that Stevens regarded the British *-re* ending as a slip on his part and that the word should be made uniformly *center* throughout his poetry. What this implies about other British spellings, such as "sepulchre," "lustre," "sceptre," "sombre," "meagre," etc., is less clear.

When *Letters* was reissued in 1970, Weinstock discovered to his dismay that not a single change had been incorporated into the new edition. Here is his undated letter to Holly:

Dear Holly:

Alas and alack! I have seen a copy of the new printing of LETTERS OF WALLACE STEVENS, and none of the corrections has been made in it. I flew into a rage, denounced all varieties of people, and generally made a spectacle of myself. That, of course, did no good. The only balm I can apply to the wound

is that the printer admits freely that the mistake was his, and small consolation that is.

Now that the horse has been stolen, naturally, everyone has taken every possible step to see that (a) no further reprintings of any book will be made without consulting the responsible editor, who in turn is to take matters up with the author whenever that is possible. But even such care will not, I am well aware, guarantee even a reasonable approach to perfection in present circumstances of untrained personnel at printers, as everywhere.

The worst of the matter is that the missing words on page 425 are still missing, despite the fact that we have for some time had galley proofs in which the correction was made. How this could have happened without the intervention of pure malice it is hard to understand. But my rule is never to suspect malice when sheer ignorance or ineptitude will explain more than enough.

I am particularly sorry that this should have happened to this book—and to you. And now, let us pray.

Miss Holly Stevens
60 Ardmore Street
Hamden, Connecticut 06517

As ever, cordially,
Herbert Weinstock
Editor

Although Weinstock claims that procedures at Knopf had been changed to make sure that future editions of *Letters* would be correct, with the exception of the inclusion of the words on page 425, none of the other corrections were ever made.

Why did the new procedures not ensure that subsequent editions of *Letters* corrected the errors? It may be that the new editors at Knopf simply felt the book sold well as it was and they were not willing to incur any additional expense in resetting the type. I suspect the real reason, however, is that Herbert Weinstock died suddenly in 1971, so he was not there to oversee the project. The one error that was corrected was easy to spot. J. M. Edelstein, in his *Wallace Stevens: A Descriptive Bibliography*, indicates that for the first English printing of *Letters* (1967), there was an errata slip for the missing words on page 425:

Note: On p. 425 an erratum slip is inserted on which is printed the words 'Everyone feels this when first' which had been omitted at the bottom of the page . . . (136)

Nobody would have had to consult an editor or file to see it. Further, Holly Stevens wrote to Knopf on a number of different occasions regarding that particular error. The error must have seemed particularly glaring to her, since it occurs in one of the few letters in the volume addressed to her.

Still, the memory of the uncorrected errors must have remained with at least some at Knopf. As the publisher was preparing the first paperback edition of Holly Stevens' selection, *The Palm at the End of the Mind* (1972; the hardback edition was published in 1971), she asked the president of Knopf, William Koshland, if an error in *The Palm at the End of the Mind* had been corrected. He replied in a letter dated June 29, 1971, saying, "Yes, the correction is to be made in plates so it will be available when the paperback comes through in February. So went out the instructions, and so will they be followed (I crossed my fingers.) . . ." Although the parenthetical aside may simply be seen as an executive's wry comment on the efficacy of his instructions, it seems likely that Koshland was alluding to the disaster of 1970.

Fortunately, Holly Stevens did document the mistakes she found in *Letters*. Most are typographical errors. I suspect that scores of readers, however, have assumed some of the mistakes are arcane wordplay on the part of a poet famous for his exquisite and unusual sense of words. In his bibliography of Stevens' works, Edelstein lists eight of the errors, characterizing the rest as "punctuation and typographical errors of a minor nature" (135). Among the corrections Edelstein found too insignificant to mention are neglected brackets around ellipses (that is to say, the ellipses appear to be the poet's, but they actually indicate an excision by the editor), two notations as to the sources of quotations in letters, and additions to the index. Edelstein also states that the errors "will be corrected in a later edition" (135)—and for this, neither he nor the Weinstock at Knopf can be blamed, since I am sure both thought that this would indeed happen.

The narrative of why the errors in *Letters* were not corrected has implications for ascertaining the correct text of Stevens' poems. It shows that a breakdown in communication between departments at the publisher kept mistakes from being amended. It also gives a brief snapshot of the relationship between Holly Stevens and Herbert Weinstock, who was an important editor for Stevens. Finally, it shows a bit of the editorial workings at Knopf, which, again, is an almost unexplored component of the poet's career.

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Note

The note was made possible in part by grants from the Harry Ransom Research Center in Austin, Texas, the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, and faculty research grants from Assumption College.

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Wallace Stevens' Savage Commonplace

JEFFREY WESTOVER

WALLACE STEVENS EXPLORED the nuances of the savage in poems throughout his career, making an American modernism partly out of an indigenous primitive that corresponds, on the one hand, to the primitivism of transatlantic modernism and, on the other, to the mythology of the American Indian.¹ He makes the idea of the savage central to several poems by defining it as native, exotic, wild, and authentic, but it is in his figuration of common American places that Stevens eventually comes to locate the savage in order to salvage it from the excesses of his early poetry. This gesture risks, yet implicitly recognizes, the dangers of colonial projections on native others, for such projections violate Stevens' stoic allegiance to reality. Stevens echoes the preoccupation with primitivism of his contemporaries, but he is far more interested in the savage as an attribute than a particular embodiment, human or otherwise. Instead, the figure of the Native American haunts and enlivens Stevens' work, influencing his aesthetics by coloring his varied uses of the words *savage*, *barbaric*, *native*, and *wild*.² In a way that parallels the late-nineteenth-, early twentieth-century policy of Indian assimilation into mainstream American society, Stevens figuratively assimilates the savage into his poetic *mun-do*, making it the sign of the authentic by locating it in the heart of the ordinary.

Stevens' savage metaphors reflect the vogue of modernist primitivism. They also put him in the context of American literary history by connecting his work to a longstanding concern of previous writers.³ Kenneth Lincoln discusses Stevens' figurations of savagery, wilderness, and especially Eden (194–217), while Anca Rosu argues that Mesoamerican mythology informs several of his poems (241–56). By contrast, Edward Marx underscores the complexity of the poet's attitude toward Mayans and cultural nationalism by citing Stevens' letters to Hi Simons and Leonard van Geyzel (*Idea of a Colony* 145–47). Stevens' remarks to van Geyzel acknowledge not only his dismissive attitude toward Mayan aesthetics ("I think we feel the same aversion to Maya art that we feel to Hindu art even after we have taken into account the fact that Maya art is almost brute while Hindu art is just the opposite"), but also his cultural nationalism ("We feel a special interest in things of this sort because they give us the antiquity which the English like to deny us") (*L* 614).

Although Stevens insists that the supreme fiction “must be abstract,” such studies indicate that his adaptation of the savage as a symbol for the imagination is framed and partly influenced by colonial and subsequent U.S. history. In what follows, I focus on how Stevens’ poems reflect two cultural contexts of his time: the early twentieth-century vogue for Indian culture as a form of authenticity and the policy of Indian assimilation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Several events and institutions contributed to the campaign for Indian assimilation, both before and during Stevens’ lifetime, including the end of the Indian wars, the Dawes Act of 1887 (in which collective Indian property was converted to private landholding, a process in which many unscrupulous whites swindled more land from Indians), the Indian boarding school system designed to promote cultural assimilation, and the Indian Citizenship Act. Other cultural contexts relevant to Stevens’ metaphors of savagery include the popular Wild West shows in which Indians performed (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 66; Kasson 161–219)⁴ and a renewed anthropological interest in Indians of the American Southwest during the first three decades of the twentieth century, some of which was influenced by the cultural relativism espoused by Franz Boas (Dippie 281–84; Rushing 4). “The granting of general Indian citizenship in 1924,” writes Brian Dippie,

crowned the assimilationist epoch in Indian affairs. At the same time, it capped the popular revival of the Vanishing American under way since the passage of the Dawes Act. The passing of the frontier had turned the Wild West into a treasured memory, a mythical embodiment of the nation’s youth. If the pioneer represented the forces of change that had transformed the West, the Indian naturally represented what had been lost. It was time to mourn and to remember. . . . Now that dark cloth, shoe leather, and short hair were turning yesterday’s warriors into immigrants in their own land, the white man had discovered that they possessed something precious, something basic to the nation’s identity. (199–200)

This nostalgia for Indian things is connected to the contradiction at the heart of a colonial democracy, a political system that champions individual freedom for colonizers and their progeny but withholds or curtails it for indigenous populations. The ideology of savagery justified the continued dispossession of Native Americans by defining it as a form of trade. According to David Wallace Adams, the rationale went this way: “Indians, having land in abundance, needed civilization; whites possessed civilization but needed land” (6).

Equally important, Stevens’ preoccupation with metaphors of savagery both reflects and reacts to a contemporary artistic interest in American Indian culture, exemplified by the display of Indian art in New York gal-

leries instead of natural history museums, by the development of the artist colony at Taos, New Mexico, and by critical discourse about Indian art by many contemporaries, some of whom Stevens read or knew personally, such as Walter Pach, Alice Corbin Henderson, and Paul Rosenfeld.⁵ In addition, Stevens' 1923 stay in Santa Fe, New Mexico, with Witter Bynner may have exposed him to Native American art and the primitivist ideas that white writers and artists attached to them (Richardson, *Later Years* 22; L 471).⁶ As W. Jackson Rushing points out, many artists in the first half of the twentieth century took an interest in Native American art and primitivism, often viewing Indian culture as a positive alternative to mainstream culture, which was regarded as too commercialized, materialist, and sexually repressed (1–12).⁷ “By the early twentieth century, . . .” writes Philip Deloria, “many Americans had become fascinated with a positive . . . Indian Other, one who represented authentic reality in the face of urban disorder and alienating mass society” (74).

This cultural phenomenon is relevant to Stevens, for he adapts the concept of the savage by treating it as a symbol of authenticity that assimilates the Indian legacy in American culture. This assimilation is deliberate on his part, as he suggests in a letter of April 11, 1921, to Alice Corbin Henderson. In the letter, Stevens responds to Henderson's gift of her new book of poems, which is inspired by the Indian culture and topography of the American southwest:

Red Earth came just before I left, but I did not have time to read it until last evening. It raises again the question of what to do about the damned Indians. I suppose the poets will have to do just what the pioneers did, and that is assimilate them. Their native aesthetic comes out as clean as a bone in your song about striking the ground with curved horns, which made an impression on me when I first read it. But their native aesthetic, like the aesthetic of England, France, Peru, and so on, is all something that we have to assimilate, and not imitate. This sort of thing is really becoming an ordeal. (qtd. in Filreis 15)

As Alan Filreis comments, “If poets should be to the *damned Indians* what the pioneers were to them, surely in this conception the poets' Indians are not so much real people with a specific historical fate as an old set of cultural materials to be newly inscribed” (4). Nonetheless, Stevens' reference to assimilation echoes the policy of assimilation embodied by the Dawes Act and the Indian boarding school movement. As Richard H. Pratt, the leading figure in the latter, insisted, his goal was to kill the Indian and save the man, leading him from savagery into civilization (David Adams 52). Stevens figuratively reverses this historical process, heralding the savage as an aesthetic value in ways that echo Whitman and parallel the cultural phenomenon Deloria calls “playing Indian.”

“Because those seeking authenticity have already defined their own state as inauthentic,” writes Deloria,

they easily locate authenticity in the figure of an Other. This Other can be coded in terms of time (nostalgia as archaism), place (the small town), or culture (Indianness). The quest for such an authentic Other is a characteristically modern phenomenon, one that has often been played out in the contradictions surrounding America’s long and ambivalent engagement with Indianness. (101)

In keeping with Deloria’s paradigm, Stevens often assimilates the ideology of savagery into his aesthetics of intensity and authenticity. Ultimately, I would argue, his most complete assimilation of the Indian is in his aesthetic fusion of the savage with the commonplace.

By focusing on the savage as more of an attribute than a substance, Stevens adapted familiar ideas about “primitive” people and states of mind, rendering those ideas in abstract and sometimes stereotypical, sometimes less predictable forms. In “The Cuban Doctor,” for example, Stevens portrays an Indian as a threatening, almost demonic enemy. Although this poem features its Indian as a stereotype, the dramatic situation of the poem turns out to be paradigmatic: as a familiar enemy, the “damned Indian” helps Stevens dramatize an internal struggle in an overtly theatrical way. (The staginess of Stevens’ drama may weirdly echo the performances of Wild West shows, which enjoyed their heyday in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period coinciding with Stevens’ youth and young manhood). In “The Cuban Doctor,” as Stevens pointed out in a subsequent letter to Henderson (dated March 27, 1922), the struggle is between the imagination as action and the imagination as an enervated dream.⁸ Stevens depicts the Indian as a force of nature by emphasizing his stealth, violence, and speed:

I went to Egypt to escape
The Indian, but the Indian struck
Out of his cloud and from his sky.

This was no worm bred in the moon,
Wriggling far down the phantom air,
And on a comfortable sofa dreamed.

The Indian struck and disappeared.
I knew my enemy was near—I
Drowning in summer’s sleepest horn. (51)

In the poem, the Egyptian setting and the enemy Indian mediate the Cuban Doctor's relationship to the world and to himself. In the syntax and lineation of the last stanza, for example, it is unclear whether the enemy is the Indian or the "I." Does the enemy Indian somehow become part of the psyche, as the imperious, mirroring *I* that opens and closes the penultimate line might suggest? No matter how one answers this question, it is clear that the Indian permeates the consciousness of the Doctor and seems inescapable. The self is haunted, even infected by this violent, sky-borne Indian. Stevens' orchestration of exotic figures and places, including the Cuban persona, shows the ease with which he adapts the stereotype without much concern about its racial implications or figurative flatness. As an enemy, the Indian's main function is to advance the psychological conflict of the poem, just as stock black characters dramatize the poet's sexual or existential concerns in such poems as "Ploughing on Sunday," "The Silver Plough-Boy," "Exposition of the Contents of a Cab," "Two at Norfolk," "Some Friends from Pascagoula," "Nudity in the Colonies," and "Prelude to Objects."

Stevens makes more sophisticated use of Indian primitivism in key passages of other texts (including a letter of 1948 to José Rodríguez Feo), often by adapting inherited notions about savagery to his own ends, which are more psychological, aesthetic, and spiritual than anthropological or historical. Although "The Cuban Doctor," "Thinking of a Relation between the Images of Metaphors," and "Extraordinary References" refer to Indians directly, such poems as "Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit" and "The Pediment of Appearance" (which features a "savage transparency" as the object of its quest) offer abstractions of savagery as metaphors for plain reality and the experience of its disclosure. Similar abstractions also occur in major long poems. In fact, "The Comedian as the Letter C," "Credences of Summer," and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" may be viewed as a series of quests for authenticity, the objects of which are figured as encounters with the savage as a form of the sublime. In the more modest terms that show how equal in importance Stevens felt the ordinary was to the heroic, however, "Arrival at the Waldorf" may be regarded as a model of the way Stevens' imagination transfigures social and historical realities even as it is conditioned by them.

By evoking the Waldorf hotel and the country of Guatemala in "Arrival at the Waldorf," Stevens transfigures wildness into a psychological state, a wildness of place or inscape that corresponds to Stevens' figurations of savagery or primitiveness. Stevens contrasts the "alien, point-blank, green and actual" yet distant qualities of Guatemala with the luxury and artifice of life in the Waldorf:

Home from Guatemala, back at the Waldorf.
This arrival in the wild country of the soul,
All approaches gone, being completely there,

Where the wild poem is a substitute
For the woman one loves or ought to love,
One wild rhapsody a fake for another. (219)

Although the poem poses a basic contrast between the “wild country of the soul” and “actual Guatemala,” it also reveals the inadequacy of the Waldorf and of figurative substitution per se, which valorizes Guatemala and suggests that it produces a more genuine (because more Dionysian) “wild rhapsody” than the fake one of the poem and the Waldorf setting. The speaker needs the alien, vivid actuality of Guatemala as the “real” foundation for his fantasy, but he believes that only by remaining alien to it can he perpetuate his imagined version of it. His “arrival” is, in other words, predicated on his departure from Guatemala, even as his hotel “home” is presumably impermanent.

The syntax, line-breaks, and occasionally odd diction emphasize this state of affairs, making the reader as aware of it as the speaker is. For example, the clause, “You touch the hotel,” disorients the reader because of the disparity in scale and category between “you” and “hotel,” a disproportion that echoes the discrepancy between “twenty snowy mountains” and the single eye of the blackbird in the first of the “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” (74). You cannot touch moonlight or sunlight directly, or at least you do not necessarily feel it when you do. So the speaker finds himself a long way off from the embrace of the “contemplated spouse” in the alienating environment of his temporary residence (342). Yet to enter the “wild country of the soul,” the poem claims, requires an imaginative abandon that depends not only on having seen “green and actual Guatemala” and faced its point-blank fury, but on having left it, in being and remaining distant from it but not from the wildness it signifies (presumably because of its Mayan culture). Through its paradoxical syntax and figuration, the poem indicates that this distance is necessary to the emergence of the imagination and the experience of authenticity associated with it. The idea of a vitally real place provides the possibility for the compensation the speaker fantasizes (and undercuts) over the course of the poem. This state of affairs, I suggest, is characteristic of Stevens’ figuration of Indians and his conceptualizations of savagery as an aesthetic category. Such abstraction or intellectual distancing is Stevens’ way of assimilating the Indian, an imaginative process in which Indians often vanish but the brute savagery historically associated with them persists. In “The Cuban Doctor” and in other texts, the Indian becomes an idea of the savage, an idea that symbolizes authenticity for Stevens and inspires him.

Renée Bergland offers a model for interpreting Stevens’ savage figures in relation to their cultural genealogy. In *The National Uncanny*, Bergland concludes that because Indian ghosts recur throughout U.S. history, American writers are obsessed with them. She explains this obsession by arguing that anyone

who tries to imagine himself or herself as an American subject, must internalize both the colonization of Native Americans and the American stance against colonialism. He or she must simultaneously acknowledge the American horror and celebrate the American triumph. The potencies of both wish and counterwish—here the desire to continue colonizing Native people and the desire to escape from colonialist regimes—create an obsessional mindset, in which American subjects continually return to the Native American figures who haunt them. (16)

In general, Stevens seems less horrified by colonization than Bergland's paradigm assumes, but her model is relevant for understanding the impact of desire in his figurations of savagery. Although he may come nearest to displaying the obsession of Bergland's theory in "The Comedian as the Letter C," in later poems such as "Extraordinary References," "A Completely New Set of Objects," and "Thinking of a Relation between the Images of Metaphors," he evokes the savage as a symbol and adapts local place names of Indian origin to make them embody the imagination in all its raw vigor. In "A Completely New Set of Objects," "Credences of Summer," "The World as Meditation," and canto IV of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," Stevens makes the idea of the savage aesthetically effective by showing how it constitutes and enlivens the commonplace.

According to Lawrence Kramer, in fact, in his later poems Stevens positions place-names as *genii loci* that, because of their relative obscurity and hence lack of connotation, come to represent a mythically transfigured absolute (172–78; 191–97; 201). Although that claim would seem to go too far, given Stevens' emphasis on the interplay between the imagination and reality rather than on a final synthesis or transcendence of them, Kramer's insight about Stevens' treatment of place is confirmed by Eleanor Cook's view that Stevens' play with place-names "makes ordinary place . . . extraordinary" ("Place-Names" 189). Through their metamorphoses into supremely American places, such common places come to function as the "savage source" of Stevens' poetry, the transfiguring stuff of his luminous imagination (56). In particular, the Indian persists in the abstracted form of the place-names Stevens refers to in some of his later poems (Tulpehocken, Tinicum, Cohansy, Swatara, Perkiomen, Oley). As Lincoln puts it, "place names make Stevens continuously aware that we stand on previously named, indeed inhabited, native American ground" (203). In his repeated conjurations of the savage, Stevens assimilates the figure of the Indian, turning the actual Indian into a ghostly vestige of the names that survive him. This process not only haunts but also deeply inspires and enlivens much of Stevens' work, for by figuring reality as simultaneously savage and ordinary, he offers his poems as embodiments of authenticity.

In such poems as "Indian River," which was initially published in a 1917 issue of *Soil* as the final poem in a sequence called "Primordia," Ste-

vens seems to have tamed the conflict between Bergland's national horror and triumph to such an extent that it is hard to trace colonial horror in his generically named river.⁹ The river embodies the earth's rejuvenating energies. Not just a figure in a background, its watery jingle echoes the sound made by the trade wind and the red-bird's sexual, energetic (even aggressive) "breasting." Unlike the ocean in "The Idea of Order at Key West," the river is not merely a place by which the speaker walks, but the region's very bloodstream.

At the same time, the overall understatement, together with the monotony of the anaphora ("It is the same"), prepares the way for the wistfulness that closes the poem. The loss ("perdu") and renunciation ("nunnery") as well as the hint of anger (*beaches* as a pun for *bitches*) suggest the sense of defeat and melancholy felt by the speaker in the face of a beautiful world. The poem evokes the primordial fecundity of Indian River and the earth it feeds, registering its desirability, but its musical patterns just as surely accent the barriers to fulfillment: in contrast to the murmurous nasals that open the poem (*wind, jingles, rings, in, nets, around*), the hard *k*-sounds of "racks" and "docks" underscore the discontent felt by the speaker and correspond to the somber consonance of "bosage" and "beaches" at the end of the poem. On the rack of his deprivation and isolation, the speaker's view of Florida's lush wonders, with its showy palmettos, fragrant orange trees, and sheltering cedars, only increases his pain, tempting him with what he does not or cannot have. Like Tantalus, the speaker is almost near enough to enjoy what he desires, but he cannot partake of it. Here the vague displacement of the human Indian to the river named for him marks the haunting allure of the primitive at the same that it reveals the speaker's insuperable distance from its primal powers and fulfillments. Florida is a pleasant playground, a site of dream and desire, but a territory that brings home the dead remoteness of the colonial legacy, the feeling that what has been won may be the product of a pyrrhic victory. The pastoral qualities of the poem, especially its languorous melancholy, preclude the emergence of the savage. Indian River may be mysterious enough to be evocative, but it is not fierce enough to be savage.

In other poems, however, Stevens came to articulate a paradoxical yet characteristically "savage commonplace" as his expression of the conflict between a reality and an imagination that he found to be by turns both savage and ordinary. Stevens' combination of these disparate terms reflects his assimilation of the Native American in the evolution of his poetics. As one more romance with the noble savage, Stevens' gesture exemplifies the habit of projecting one's own fears and fantasies onto the figure of the colonized Other, but the haunting recurrence of that figure also indicates the inspiring impact of the Indian on Stevens' imagination. As he puts it in one of the variations in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," "The commonplace became a rumpling of blazons" (413).¹⁰ In the wrinkles of its rumpling, the commonplace conjured forth by that heraldic line discloses both "The vul-

gate of experience" (397) and New Haven's transfiguration into the modest new heaven of the poet's imagination. Stevens' rumpling of blazons, or genres, shows the connections between the savage and the ordinary.

By combining these disparate entities, Stevens conveys his view of the fundamental character of human experience. In one passage from "The Comedian as the Letter C," for example, Stevens momentarily focuses on the figure of the Indian in the midst of his quest for authenticity. Through his protagonist, Crispin, Stevens seeks to express his allegiance to plain reality and to show how dramatic and fierce this reality is. As Crispin learns in section IV, "The Idea of a Colony," place is the shaping spirit of the imagination, and this lesson is "worth crossing seas to find" (29):

On what strange froth does the gross Indian dote,
What Eden sapling gum, what honeyed gore,
What pulpy dram distilled of innocence,
That streaking gold should speak in him
Or bask within his images and words? (30)

Rooted in the soil of his place and possessed by it, the Indian embodies the authentic—unlike the "Maya sonneteers" of the Yucatan, who go on copying the conventions of Europe by invoking the nightingale instead of local birds (Richard P. Adams 101).¹¹ Not alienated from his environment as Stevens feels himself and his contemporaries to be in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" ("we live in a place / That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves / And hard it is in spite of blazoned days" [332]), the Indian is so at one with his world that his language is an emanation of it.

In "The Comedian as the Letter C," Stevens assimilates the Indian by parodying and altering paradigmatic narratives of colonial conquest and national formation. He recapitulates the discovery and colonization of the New World, but he does so with a difference. As Edward Marx has pointed out, Stevens fuses historical narratives with literary quest in order to dramatize his hero's development as a representative man and poet in the New World, a process predicated on "the imaginative appropriation of the exotic and the primitive" ("Comedian as Colonist" 176). His parody pays homage to and ironically transfigures these genres, rewriting the process of conquest and colonization as the maverick quest of a philosophic aesthete (Davenport 147–54; Riddel 94–5; Bloom 71; Salomon 299). By characterizing his New World hero as a clown instead of a conquistador, Stevens not only makes fun of the epic treatments of Columbus's voyage and the colonizers who followed but also questions the nature of the relationship between Americans and their land.¹² Stevens tropes his nation's history and culture through his tale of Crispin, but in describing Crispin's failure as a colonist, he lampoons the grandiosity of epic and apocalypse (as later exemplified in "The Waste Land"), rejecting the suitability of these genres to his cultural moment (Longenbach 84–88). Stevens' "gross Indian" may

not be recognizable as a contemporary citizen, but the poet's parody of narratives of conquest and colonization acknowledges the arbitrary, even willful nature of their conventions, including their characterizations of Indians as savage, for, as Stevens puts it in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," "To impose is not / To discover" (349).

The assimilation of the savage is as central to the aesthetics of "Credences of Summer" as it is to "The Comedian as the Letter C," but in "Credences of Summer" (as perhaps also in "The Cuban Doctor," "Arrival at the Waldorf," and "Nomad Exquisite"), Stevens ascribes savagery to the poetic self rather than the stereotypical figure of a primitive. In the seventh stanza of "Credences of Summer," which acts out a familiar imperative enunciated in the second stanza ("Let's see the very thing and nothing else" [322]), Stevens tracks a song that arises from the depth of the American forest, the place where, as the settings of Stevens' "The Pediment of Appearance" ("Young men go walking in the woods, / Hunting for the great ornament" [314]) and Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" also remind us, the savage has its origin (the word *savage* derives from the Latin *silvaticus*, which means "of the woods, wild" and which itself derives from the root noun *silva*, or forest):

Far in the woods they sang their unreal songs,
Secure. It was difficult to sing in the face
Of the object. The singers had to avert themselves
Or else avert the object. Deep in the woods
They sang of summer in the common fields.

They sang desiring an object that was near,
In face of which desire no longer moved,
Nor made of itself that which it could not find . . .
Three times the concentrated self takes hold, three times
The thrice concentrated self, having possessed

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

In this passage the acts of possession, "savage scrutiny," and "subjugation" recall the conquest and colonization of the New World that "The Comedian as the Letter C" parodies.¹³ Here, however, the "concentrated self," which is inspired by the songs of primordial woodland figures whose relation to their environment makes them like the ruddy old man in part III of "Credences of Summer," "grips" its object in a second phase of "scru-

tiny" in order either "to subjugate / Or yield to subjugation," suggesting that the self's possession of the world's objects is a two-way process in which the self may dominate its objects of perception or be dominated (and permeated) by those objects. The formulation is another version of the reversed theses in "The Comedian as the Letter C," "Man is the intelligence of his soil" (22) and "His soil is man's intelligence" (29). This section of the poem assimilates the Indian legacy by impersonating or appropriating savage behavior and making it central to the poem's existential quest. Stevens' speaker goes native in his effort to unite himself to life and experience it in its abundance.

Although there is some truth to Edward Marx's claim that "to speak at all is to engage in a kind of colonial violence, committing oneself to a hierarchy in which the subject uses the symbol to dominate the object" (*Idea* 155), here Stevens shows that one's "savage scrutiny" of the landscape is a profoundly intense, profoundly mutual negotiation between the self and the world. If the self expresses a "violence for" the objects it possesses in a "concentred" and "savage scrutiny," it also risks its "subjugation" to the items in its environment. The savagery of this scrutiny, then, is manifestly Janus-faced. Like Crispin in "The Comedian as the Letter C" (and like the representative American audience addressed in Robert Frost's "The Gift Outright"), the concentrated self grows "studious of a self possessing him" that does not exist in "the crusty town" of Old World civilization but that emerges from its immediate environment in the New (26). It is the risk inherent in this "savage scrutiny" that gives the "hard prize" of experience its authenticity.

"Extraordinary References," included like "Credences of Summer" and "A Completely New Set of Objects" in *Transport to Summer*, follows the pattern of "Arrival at the Waldorf" of transfiguring the wild and exotic into a psychological state:

The mother ties the hair-ribbons of the child
And she has peace. *My Jacomyntje!*
Your great-grandfather was an Indian fighter.

The cool sun of the Tulpehocken refers
To its barbed, barbarous rising and has peace.
These earlier dissipations of the blood

And brain, as the extraordinary references
Of ordinary people, places, things,
Compose us in a kind of eulogy. (320)

As James Longenbach argues, the poem works out a stabilizing, solacing "equilibrium" in the wake of the second World War (272). But it does so by marking a distance from the primordial national past represented by the

Indian fighter patriarch and “the inherited garden,” for Vertumnus, one of the agents or symbols of change in the poem, is merely “second-hand,” a decorative statue recalling the seductive appeal and power of a disguised but living god:

*My Jacomyntje! This first spring after the war
In which your father died, still breathes for him
And breathes again for us a fragile breath.*

In the inherited garden, a second-hand
Vertumnus creates an equilibrium.
The child’s three ribbons are in her plaited hair. (320)

If Vertumnus is “second-hand,” then how stable or authentic is the “equilibrium” he creates? The poem focuses on the process of this creation not only to underscore the fictiveness of its equilibrium but also to drive home its tenuousness (“*fragile breath*”). In doing so, it reminds readers of the constructed character of culture. Like a legend on the map of his poetic *mundo*, this reminder is part of Stevens’ assimilation of Indian culture, for it fuses a classical Roman legacy with the Native American one evoked by the ancestral “Indian fighter” and the reference to Tulpehocken, a name that comes from the Lenape word *Tulpewikaki*, meaning “turtle-land” (Cook, *Reader’s Guide* 208).

By comparison with the “barbed, barbarous rising” of the sun on the river Tulpehocken, Vertumnus comes off as a bit contrived. The river’s native name and its masculine power (barbed as bearded, barbed as sharp or piercing) strike the first note of peace, a state that, as Longenbach points out, is not achieved but merely is (272). The river’s mirroring of the sun, together with the circular syntax of lines 4 and 5, points to a natural harmony embodied by the Tulpehocken, a harmony Stevens associates with a local place and its Native American name. The Tulpehocken is both thoroughly domestic and barbarously insurgent, as radically alien as it is rooted in earthy energies. By figuring it as both, Stevens succeeds in expressing the raw, primordial power of the place as well as its ordinariness. The poem infuses the Tulpehocken with a mythic grandeur and fecundity that leaves Vertumnus a little pale by comparison, yet it also weds the two figures in a way that acknowledges the hybridity of American culture. In the inherited garden of this poem, equilibrium is achieved through “barbarous rising,” reminding us that the equilibrium is tentative and impermanent, for it is just as characterized by flux and change as the river or Vertumnus are.¹⁴

Stevens assimilates popular Indian mythology in a similar way in a playful yet impassioned letter of December 1, 1948, to his Cuban correspondent José Rodríguez Feo. In the following excerpt from the letter, Stevens explains his view of the savage as the hero of an existential and artistic quest. Stevens’ reference to Consuelo follows up on a story in one

of Rodríguez Feo's previous letters, a story in which the neighbor woman killed and cooked his mother's prize cock when it wandered onto her property (*Secretaries* 140):

One of the great spectacles in the world today is the flood of books coming from nothing and going back to nothing. This is due in part to the subjection of literature to money, in part to the existence of a lettered class to which literature is a form of self-indulgence. The savage assailant of life who uses literature as a weapon just does not exist, any more than the savage lover of life exists. . . . What kind of book would that dazzling human animal Consuelo sit down to read after she had finished washing the blood off her hands and had hidden once more her machete in the piano? Will you write it for her? Sartre or Camus would if they had the time.

. . . Here one is in a fury to understand and to participate and one realizes that if there is anything to understand and if there is anything in which to participate one will pretty nearly have to make it oneself. Thus José stands up in his room . . . and he creates by mere will a total wakefulness, brilliant in appearance, multi-colored, of which he is the dominant master and which he fills with words of understanding. . . . Bárbaro! Here the word shows its excellence. I suppose one never really writes about life when it is someone else's life, in the feeble laborious reportage of the student and artist. One writes about it when it is one's own life provided one is a good barbarian, a true Cuban, or a true Pennsylvanian Dutchman, in the linguistics of that soul which propriety, like another Consuelo, has converted into nothingness. (*Secretaries* 144)

In championing the "bárbaro," Stevens is responding to the following passage in Rodríguez Feo's letter to him of November 18:

It is like calling someone *bárbaro* (barbarian): in Spain a great compliment (or *piropo*). So to a great bullfighter one will yell "Bárbaro." I heard many times a Spanish poet refer to Cervantes as "ese bárbaro" (that barbarian). So if you call me *bárbaro*, I shall be pleased and never forget your enthusiasm and appreciation of my good virtues (Latin sense). (*Secretaries* 141)

Deloria provides a helpful cultural context for assessing Stevens' use of the savage persona in his letter. According to Deloria, the impersonation of Indians by non-Indians was a widespread cultural practice in early twentieth-century America. "At the turn of the twentieth century," he writes, "Indian play helped preserve a sense of frontier toughness, com-

munal warmth, and connection to the continent often figured around the idea of the authentic" (129). By equating the Cuban and the Pennsylvanian Dutchman with the barbarian, then, Stevens not only embellishes the cultural formula of his foreign friend (assimilating Rodríguez Feo's manly virtue to the nostalgia for frontier toughness mentioned by Deloria), but he also participates in a contemporary fantasy of fellow North Americans. As important, he builds on his longstanding view that the local provides the basis for his poetic mythology. In his letter, he relishes the contradiction of his oxymoron: like the Indian names of places that appear in such poems as "Extraordinary References," the combination of Pennsylvanian Dutchman and barbarian unite the commonplace and the savage.

Stevens echoes his epistolary impersonation of the savage as well as the passage of interior conflict from "Credences of Summer" in canto IV of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." In canto IV Stevens paradoxically equates plainness with savagery. In the excesses of his rhetoric in "The Comedian as the Letter C" and in the gaudy extremes of his earlier poetry, Stevens reveals his affection for the trope of the American as wild man. The savage and the barbaric take on for Stevens a sense of the raw and the primordial, and they answer his desire for existential order, meaning, and plenitude. His use of the vocabulary of savagery—of the wild, unrestrained, and violent—marks his effort to win from the quotidian an imaginative panache. In light of the letter to Rodríguez Feo, the fighter in the following passage seems to be "The savage assailant of life who uses literature as a weapon" to conquer alienation and achieve meaning:

The plainness of plain things is savagery,
As: the last plainness of a man who has fought
Against illusion and was, in a great grinding

Of growling teeth, and falls at night, snuffed out
By the obese opiates of sleep. Plain men in plain towns
Are not precise about the appeasement they need.

They only know a savage assuagement cries
With a savage voice; and in that cry they hear
Themselves transposed, muted and comforted

In a savage and subtle and simple harmony,
A matching and mating of surprised accords,
A responding to a diviner opposite. (399)

This passage figures the savage as a quality of intense inner turmoil in a way that echoes the metaphors of psychological wildness in "Arrival at the Waldorf" and of psychic combat in the seventh stanza of "Credences of Summer." The indeterminate syntax of the passage dramatizes the in-

teriority of the conflict, for the prepositional phrase “in a great grinding / Of growling teeth” may modify both the plain man and the illusion he fights against. Similarly, the cries of “savage assuagement” may be inside or outside the plain men who hear them (or both at once). Evidently the plain men are simultaneously “savage assailants of life” and the besieged victims of life’s impoverishing, savage plainness.

The internal conflict of the passage from “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” shares something of the mythic primitivism that Stevens flaunts in “The Cuban Doctor.” Even though the former is far more abstract than the latter, in both cases the savage is at the heart of the speaker’s psychic struggle, and in both cases the encounter is intensified by a defining feature of the savage—its irrational, even monstrous primitivism. To found the “enormous nation” in the visionary republic of his poetry, Stevens transforms the savage from the physical state of a “savage voice” into the more abstract and nuanced form of a “savage and subtle and simple harmony.” But as with so much else in Stevens’ writing, that synthesizing state of affairs is only temporary, for in order to remain authentically savage, “It Must Change.”

The high-flown rhetoric of canto IV, however, is perhaps less frequent in Stevens’ later work, and in keeping with his appreciative commitment to ordinary experience, Stevens wrote other poems in which his harmonization of the savage and the ordinary is less spectacular and dramatic, but no less integral to his vision. In “A Completely New Set of Objects,” for example, Stevens figures ghostly Indians as friends and poetic ancestors instead of emphasizing their savage state as a form of psychic conflict. The poetic stance is more at ease than the one in canto IV of “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” but its equanimity is part of what makes it equally convincing. In “A Completely New Set of Objects,” the “makers” answer the speaker’s desire with a majestic calm that may feel more compelling than the larger-than-life combat of “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven.” A poise characterizes both poems, but in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” the poise emerges, whereas in “A Completely New Set of Objects,” it exists from the beginning. The composure in “A Completely New Set of Objects” is more sure and placid, even though it is as “willed and wanted” (307) as the “simple harmony / . . . of surprised accords” in canto IV of “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven.” In short, the assimilation of the Indian in “A Completely New Set of Objects” is more successful, and its corresponding expression of authenticity is potentially stronger. The poem’s authenticity derives from Stevens’ harmonious fusion of the Indian legacy with familiar landscape, a figurative phenomenon I have called “the savage commonplace.” As with “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” however, the mental state of “A Completely New Set of Objects” is temporary, for it *must* be so in order to remain authentic.

In “A Completely New Set of Objects,” Stevens supplies the specific human referents normally designated under the sign of the savage, though

(as in "Extraordinary References" and "Thinking of a Relation between the Images of Metaphors") he does so in an oblique manner (in this case by portraying them as ghostly "shadows" and "figures"):

From a Schuylkill in mid-earth there came emerging
Flotillas, willed and wanted, bearing in them

Shadows of friends, of those he knew, each bringing
From the water in which he believed and out of desire

Things made by mid-terrestrial, mid-human
Makers without knowing, or intending, uses. (307)

The poem exemplifies once more the formulation of the thesis that Crispin finally arrives at in "The Comedian as the Letter C," the assertion that "his soil is man's intelligence." As in "The Comedian as the Letter C," "The Auroras of Autumn" ("the Indian in his glade" [355]), and the late poem "Americana" ("the buckskin hoop-la, / In a returning, a seeming of return" [458]), the forgotten Indian inhabitant appears here as an ambassador of the savage or primal state of the land. "A Completely New Set of Objects" differs from "The Comedian as the Letter C" in an important respect, however. In "The Comedian as the Letter C," "Crispin was too destitute to find / In any commonplace the sought-for aid," so he sails on in quest of "a savage color" (24). In "A Completely New Set of Objects," by contrast, Stevens retains but sublimates the idea of the savage, domesticating the Indian spirits he evokes and hailing them as his "friends":

These figures verdant with time's buried verdure
Came paddling their canoes, a thousand thousand,

Carrying such shapes, of such alleviation,
That the beholder knew their subtle purpose,

Knew well the shapes were the exactest shaping
Of a vast people old in meditation . . .

Under Tinicum or small Cohansey,
The fathers of the makers may lie and weather. (307)

The place names in "A Completely New Set of Objects" triangulate the city of Philadelphia and, by association, allude to Reading, Pennsylvania, Stevens' place of birth (Richardson 35). The Schuylkill River passes through Reading and joins the Delaware just south of Philadelphia. The poem's allusions to the Indian place names *Tinicum* and *Cohansey* bring to mind the mysterious Indian past of the region and create a figurative

poetic lineage for Stevens by characterizing Indian ghosts as "The fathers of the makers,"¹⁵ for *maker* is the same word Stevens uses to characterize the singing woman as a poet-figure in "The Idea of Order at Key West." The fact that the Schuylkill feeds into the Delaware river, which divides Philadelphia from Camden, New Jersey, together with the related fact that Tinicum is the name of "an island in the Delaware River near Philadelphia," which was "settled [in] 1643," suggests a general though indirect reference to Philadelphia (1002). The river that flows by the last home of Walt Whitman might also echo with the sound of that poet's "barbaric yawp" or bear the effusive drift of his "flesh in eddies" ("Song of Myself"). The oblique reference to Philadelphia, moreover, evokes the origins of the United States in the Continental Congresses that met there, and the relatively early dates of foundation of Tinicum and Cohansey, the latter of which was settled in 1686 and which refers to the place that became Bridgeton, New Jersey (a city south of Philadelphia), reinforce the significance of the poem's roundabout allusions to the origins of the United States. Cohansey, moreover, is the name of a creek that flows into the Delaware River north of Delaware Bay.

These allusions exemplify Stevens' adoption of place-names as sources for his poetic inspiration, as the rich "mid-earth" that gives rise to the "completely new set of objects" his poems praise. The savage is recognizable in the army of approaching Indian canoes, but Stevens' eerie treatment of this image tames and transfigures the savage, simultaneously valorizing the barbaric and reconfiguring the meaning and form of its exoticism. If the savage is not quite commonplace in this poem, it is clearly located in the "common" local place names to which the poem refers. Like his invocations of "Swatara," the "black river," or like Tulpehocken in "Extraordinary References," Perkiomen in "Thinking of a Relation between the Images of Metaphors," or Oley in "Credences of Summer," the linguistic traces of North America's "savage" inhabitants furnish Stevens with the means to refigure his indigenous precursors as his "friends." Like Swatara, the savage becomes the poet's "Countryman" (368).

The savage functions as the necessary yet implicit field upon which Stevens' imagination often plays throughout his career. As a trope for both the wild and the primary, the savage as primitive is an absent but assumed background upon which his imagination composes, so that the primitive comes to function as the landscape of his unique mythology. He reminds readers of the reality of colonial conquests in American history, but he does so in an increasingly abstract way as his career progresses. In response to the vogue for Indian things beginning in the early decades of the twentieth century, Stevens stands his own ground, adopting a stance that ostensibly ignores Indian culture but which in fact assimilates its influence. Perhaps this process of assimilation appears most dramatically in Stevens' figurations of savagery as reckonings with reality or quests for the authentic, but it is no less evident in his characteristic use of the

obscure Indian names for local places he knew and loved. At their best, Stevens' figurative assimilations of the Indian culminate in his oxymoronic ideal, the savage commonplace.

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Notes

I am grateful to several anonymous reviewers for their advice about revising this paper, and to Robert Kern, Guy Rotella, and Suzanne Matson for helping me improve an earlier draft. I am also grateful to the staff of Albertson's Library at Boise State University.

¹In a letter of January 9, 1940, to Hi Simons, Stevens paraphrases "Nudity at the Capitol" and "Nudity in the Colonies." In the paraphrase, he refers to the black slave and the white "massa" as savage and civilized, a formula that implicitly equates Africans and Indians as savages. For a discussion of American Indians and cultural primitivism from 1900 to 1950, see W. Jackson Rushing (1–12). Gail Levin also discusses the primitivism of American painters (453). For discussions of modernism and African primitivism, see Marianna Torgovnick and Sieglinde Lemke.

²This pattern conforms to a general one that Joshua Bellin finds throughout American literature (1). Anca Rosu sees colonization as analogous to Stevens' poetics as a whole (257). Ann Mikkelsen reads Stevens' treatment of the primitive in terms of gender and class (106).

³Many studies of the significance of the Indian in American literature focus on pre-twentieth-century texts. Writers ranging from D. H. Lawrence, Roy Harvey Pearce, and Cheryl Walker to Lucy Maddox, Susan Sheckel, Renée Bergland, and Joshua David Bellin have produced such work. Robert Berkhofer, Brian Dippie, and Richard Slotkin have written more historically wide-ranging studies of North American Indians, while Leslie Fiedler and Shari Huhndorf have focused on the myth of Indians as Vanishing Americans in the twentieth century. Walter Benn Michaels and Jared Gardner have argued that modern white writers adopt an Indian identity by inventing a spurious ancestry. More recently, Alan Trachtenberg has investigated how turn-of-the-century images of Indians were used to reframe a modern American identity, and Philip DeLoria has analyzed the recurring cultural phenomenon of white Americans imitating Indians.

⁴Paul Reddin discusses Wild West shows from 1883 to the 1930s (53–187). According to Joy Kasson, Chauncey Yellow Robe, a proponent of Indian assimilation, criticized Wild West shows, claiming that they taught audiences "that the Indian is only a savage being" (164).

⁵Joan Richardson argues that "Stevens' exposure to Pach no doubt familiarized him with at least some of the concepts and new directions in art about which Pach was passionate" (*Early Years* 402). Rushing explains that Walter Pach was an exponent of American Indian art as well as European modernism, and as an art dealer he provided advice to Stevens about collecting art (32). According to Rushing, in 1920, Pach published "The Art of the American Indian" in *The Dial*. It is possible that Stevens read the piece, although I have found no evidence that he did. In a letter to José Rodríguez Feo dated March 19, 1945, however, Stevens shows his awareness of Pach's interest, for he refers to Pach's "Indian carvings" (*Secretaries* 47). As for Rosenfeld, Stevens thought well enough of his writing to contribute a brief tribute to him ("The Shaper") in a 1948 volume (818–19). Although this indicates Stevens' familiarity with Rosenfeld's work in general, it does not prove that Stevens knew Rosenfeld's essay "The Corn Dance," which describes a ritual dance of Pueblo Indians in ecstatic terms.

⁶As a young man, Stevens recorded his desire “to go to Arizona or Mexico” in a journal entry of December 29, 1900. Although he does not explain why he wanted to go there, he mentions his father’s resistance to the idea and admits that he “does not have any good reason for” going (L 49). The idea apparently appealed to his sense of adventure, suggesting that these regions, with their distinctive landscapes and exotic Indian cultures, had a power over his imagination.

⁷Elizabeth Hutchinson also draws attention to a vogue for Indian art in her 2009 study, *The Indian Craze: Primitivism, Modernism, and Transculturation in American Art, 1890–1915*. In the 1940s, the aesthetic ideas of the French painter Jean Dubuffet, whom Stevens admired for his painting and his rugged mode of life in Africa, functioned as another context for Stevens’ poetic primitivism (Richardson, *Later Years* 340–47; *Secretaries* 148).

⁸Wallace Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 938. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with page number(s) only in parentheses.

⁹Levin provides relevant information about the magazine in which Stevens first published “Indian River”: “In 1916–17, [Robert] Coady published a magazine called *The Soil*, which served as a platform for his eccentric opinions regarding modern art in America. In *The Soil*, he juxtaposed reproductions of Primitive Sculpture and photographs of industrial machinery and contemporary urban vistas, accompanying these incongruous pairings with typically iconoclastic statements” (464).

¹⁰In another expression of his aesthetics of the commonplace, Stevens writes in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”: “The serious reflection is composed / Neither of comic nor tragic but of commonplace” (408). For a different treatment of Stevens’ views about the role of the commonplace in his poetics, see Liesl M. Olson.

¹¹Torgovnick emphasizes the recurrent associations of earth and humanity in the religious traditions she describes in *Primitive Passions: Men, Women and the Quest for Ecstasy*.

¹²Anna Boyagoda also finds a connection between existential disorientation and colonization in “The Comedian as the Letter C”: “Crispin may be a colonizer, but he is fraught with the problems of the postcolonial exile” (63).

¹³The woodland setting, quest motif, and reference to a savage quality in “The Pediment of Appearance” make it parallel to the savage-passages in “Credences of Summer.”

¹⁴Eleanor Cook points out that Vertumnus was an Etruscan god, whose name means “the turner” or “the changer” (*Reader* 208). The name of Stevens’ god also evokes the root meaning of verse. The shape-shifting deity of plants and seasons is the star of an episode in Book XIV of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

¹⁵George R. Stewart writes that the name “Cohansey” derives “from the name of an early chief, recorded as Cohanzyck” (105), and that Tinicum is an Algonquian word, the meaning of which is “uncertain” (483).

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Selecting Three Poems by Wallace Stevens: A Roundtable Discussion

GEORGE S. LENSING, J. DONALD BLOUNT
JACQUELINE VAUGHT BROGAN
STEPHEN BURT, ELEANOR COOK, ALAN FILREIS

GEORGE S. LENSING: INTRODUCTION

WHEN I THINK OF POETS such as Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, Sylvia Plath, or W. B. Yeats, I have a fairly certain idea of the poems by which such a poet is likely to be anthologized and thus the poems on which that poet's reputation is most likely to be staked. In the case of Wallace Stevens, everyone expects to see "Sunday Morning" in such an anthology, and, almost inevitably, "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" and "Anecdote of the Jar" as well, but after that the choices have tended to be widely varied, and, at least in my opinion, sometimes strange. After studying for several years the reluctant reception of Stevens over the last half century in Great Britain, I have noted that his reputation seems to be based on hardly more than four poems, all early Stevens: "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," "The Snow Man," "Sunday Morning," and "The Idea of Order at Key West." These titles come up again and again in critical assessments. Few would argue with the merit of those four specimens, but what struck me about British critics and poets, with a few notable exceptions, was how they almost never displayed a wider knowledge of and pleasure in the "WHOLE OF HARMONIUM" (*L* 831).

All this led me to speculate about a small number of anthology pieces by Stevens that some of his critics who have been reading and writing about him for some time might offer if pressed to do so. With that idea in mind, I approached the president of the Wallace Stevens Society, John N. Serio, to ask if I could put together a panel to be called "Preferential Stevens" for the American Literature Association meeting in the spring of 2009. When he agreed, I proceeded to invite a small handful of Stevens critics of varied interests in and approaches to the poet's works to select their three (and no more) anthology pieces and to give a ten-minute rationale during their part of the session. They readily agreed. Their names are familiar ones to interested readers of Stevens: Donald Blount, Jacqueline

V. Brogan, Stephen Burt, Eleanor Cook, and Alan Filreis. (Their scholarship, of course, is by no means confined to Stevens.)

What surprised me was that only one selected "Sunday Morning" and "The Idea of Order at Key West." In making their selections, the critics quite openly professed their admiration for the craft of the given poems and offered some of the cultural contexts surrounding them, but they did not hesitate to register a more personal and affective response as well. Still, I would not have predicted choices such as "Two Letters," "Lebensweisheitspielerei," "Debris of Life and Mind," "Analysis of a Theme," "Late Hymn from the Myrrh-Mountain," or the twentieth canto of "The Man with the Blue Guitar."

There tends to be an interesting tilt in favor of Stevens' late poems among the selections: "The River of Rivers in Connecticut," "Prologues To What Is Possible," "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" (twice chosen), "The Plain Sense of Things." "Lebensweisheitspielerei" and "Two Letters," of course, are also late poems. (Incidentally, I would have included another late poem, "The World as Meditation," in my own list.)

As Burt says in his opening paragraph, Stevens' last poems possess "a style more personal, but less colorful, less immediately attractive to most undergraduates, than those of *Harmonium*, and less obviously attractive to the academy than those of Stevens' writings of the 1930s and early 1940s, which respond often to challenges that Stevens found in public events." He adds a telling remark: "The late writings look more like challenges to himself, poems about loneliness and consolation, about the failures of poetry to comfort, and about its qualified successes." I wonder if he does not put his finger on much of the power of those last poems.

Finally, the exercise here reminds us that, at least for these readers, Stevens is as various and unpredictable as he is inviting and pleasurable. Apparently, we have much to learn from listening to each other, as well as to the poet, when it comes to reading Wallace Stevens.

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IN A LETTER OF JANUARY 9, 1940, to Hi Simons, Wallace Stevens said: "We are physical beings in a physical world; the weather is one of the things that we enjoy, one of the unphilosophical realities. The state of the weather soon becomes a state of mind. There are many 'immediate' things in the world that we enjoy; a perfectly realized poem ought to be one of these things. . . . People ought to like poetry the way a child likes snow & they would if poets wrote it" (L 348–49). Three years later he expressed a similar sentiment in a letter to Louise Bechtel: "What a poet needs above everything else is acceptance. If he is not accepted, he is wasting time, so far as his readers are concerned, although not so far as he himself is con-

cerned" (L 433). Stevens hoped that people would "enjoy" his poems, and a basic requirement of the "supreme fiction" is that "It Must Give Pleasure." Yet it is safe to say that people in general (and a surprising number in academia) have never heard of Wallace Stevens, even when they know and use phrases from his works. If we are to keep his work alive into the future, we need to pick the poems that go into the anthologies with an eye to the pleasure that they give while conveying a reasonably accurate idea of his work as a whole.

Three poems that help achieve these goals are the 1948 "Large Red Man Reading," the 1915 "Sunday Morning," and the 1935 "The Idea of Order at Key West." "Large Red Man Reading" was one of three poems about which Stevens, two years before his death, told Renato Poggioli, his Italian translator: "I like very much" (L 778). It incorporates the pagan theology of "Sunday Morning" and the "ghostlier demarcations"¹ of "The Idea of Order at Key West," and it has something almost as attractive as snow or ice cream: ghosts. Thus an early reading of this accessible poem would introduce readers to his whole work in an attractive way.

There were ghosts that returned to earth to hear his phrases,
As he sat there reading. . . . (365)

These ghosts have learned through experience the failure of "imperishable bliss" (55) about which Stevens warns us in "Sunday Morning." These ghosts are refugees from that early, magisterial poem: "They were those from the wilderness of stars that had expected more" (365). (This breathtaking understatement seems to rewrite T. S. Eliot's famous understatement near the end of "Journey of the Magi": "it was (you may say) satisfactory" [100]). These ghosts are starved for pots, pans, tulips, the trivial touches of the actual world.

They were those that would have wept to step barefoot into
reality,

That would have wept and been happy, have shivered in the
frost
And cried out to feel it again, have run fingers over leaves
And against the most coiled thorn, have seized on what was
ugly

And laughed . . . (365)

The four most arresting words of the poem, "wept to step barefoot," should win over all readers who have in themselves a touch of the child. The phrase "into reality" can be put off for later reflection. The reference to "The outlines of being and its expressings, the syllables of its law: / *Poesis, poesis*, the

literal characters, the vatic lines," should also be put on hold until time for further reflection, because at this moment a minor miracle happens. As the ghosts listened to this vast abstraction, these lines and phrases

Took on color, took on shape and the size of things as they are
And spoke the feeling for them, which was what they had
lacked. (365)

The listeners, both those inside and those outside the poem, remain ghosts, but they have been, paradoxically (and Homerically), "blooded" by thought; they are, as Stevens himself was, "An abstraction blooded, as a man blooded by thought" (333). This combination of blood and mind or imagination was first proposed by Stevens in his abstract history of religious belief in "Sunday Morning":

[Jove] moved among us, as a muttering king,
Magnificent, would move among his hinds,
Until our blood, commingling, virginal,
With heaven, brought such requital to desire
The very hinds discerned it, in a star.
Shall our blood fail? Or shall it come to be
The blood of paradise? (54)

"Sunday Morning," arguably the most essential poem in the Stevens canon, is a serious and difficult undertaking, perhaps best experienced after the apparent simplicity of "Large Red Man Reading." Orthodox Sunday morning, dedicated to "The holy hush of ancient sacrifice" (53), becomes a time of death and the day itself a "wide water" of separation from the joys and sorrows of life, an actual death as opposed to the potential for death we live with always. Stevens rejects this death as the center of life, the end of life, the meaning of life, and he replaces this concept with its opposite, life in the center, in the midst of death. His audacious and oxymoronic proverb, "Death is the mother of beauty" (55), asserts a willed reality that privileges the actual world over the bare reality of our inevitable mortality. There are two deaths in "Sunday Morning," one absolute (masked by talk of "imperishable bliss" after this life) and one only potential (revealed by all of the details of this life of emotion and sensation). In the forty years that remained of his life, Stevens never tired of expressing his pagan preference. (See, for example, his 1928 declaration about "Sunday Morning": "The poem is simply an expression of paganism, although, of course, I did not think I was expressing paganism when I wrote it" [L 250].) Reading the much simpler and accessible "Large Red Man Reading" might prepare a reader to see more clearly the basic premise of this most canonical of Stevens' poems.

The third-most essential poem in the Stevens canon, "The Idea of Order at Key West," follows in the footsteps of "Sunday Morning." Its high

seriousness about poetry is a religious seriousness. As Stevens says in one of his adages, "After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption" (901). "The Idea of Order at Key West" in the Stevens world, in the book that took the place of a planet, is a profoundly religious poem, a poem of belief in a fiction. Its fifty-five lines, written when Stevens was fifty-five, prepare a reader for future summarizing and theorizing poems, even "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" and its radical but logical name for the first section: "It Must Be Abstract." Stevens, despite all of the posturing that led him to be called a dandy in early critical commentary on him, remained something of a prophet figure fulminating against the excesses of all forms of supernaturalism or idealism.

The sheer gorgeousness of the rhythm and sounds of "The Idea of Order at Key West" will always give it a high place in even the most casual acquaintance with Stevens' work, but it is the high seriousness of its theology of theory (its "*Poesis, poesis*, the literal characters, the vatic lines," one might say) that makes it Stevensian. Joseph Riddel stresses the seriousness of this poem by calling it "a modern answer to 'Dover Beach'" (120). Stevens is relentless in his search for spirit in this song, "uttered word by word," something the water cannot produce:

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)

The water lacks spirit and the ability to speak words, and yet the "Blessed rage for order" is a "rage to order words of the sea, / Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred" (106). This apparent contradiction disappears as the final two lines present the real, invariable goal of Stevens' career: ordering words "of ourselves and of our origins, / In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds" (106). This use of *ghost* is as serious as he can get; it contrasts with the physical reality of singing, its "demarcations and keener sounds." (The *OED* shows *ghostly* contrasting with *bodily* or *physical* for hundreds of years.) This ghost is what Stevens calls in one of his adages "the spiritual in reality" (914), something close to the "supreme fiction," something close to the relationship between the imagination and blood.

The three poems I propose would provide a brief sample of Stevens' best work over the course of most of his career, and they fairly and accessibly represent Stevens' deepest concerns as a poet and as a thinker. "Sunday Morning" and "The Idea of Order at Key West" already represent him in most anthologies; "Large Red Man Reading," a simpler and lighter poem, can serve as an attractive suggestion of their basic ideas.

University of South Carolina Aiken

APPARENTLY GEORGE LENSING has a sadistic streak that no one knows about, for choosing the poems for this discussion—and being limited to only *three*—was agonizing. I had to give up many favorites such as “Anecdote of the Jar,” “Domination of Black,” “Sunday Morning,” “Of Modern Poetry”—and especially “The Idea of Order at Key West.” What I have reluctantly and really painfully concluded is that if all I could teach of Stevens were three poems, or if that were all I could put in an anthology (thereby possibly limiting what future readers might know of Stevens), I would choose three late poems: two from the closing section in *The Collected Poems* called *The Rock* and one from the *Opus Posthumous*.

The first poem I would choose is “Lebensweisheitspielerei”—which idiomatically means “playing around with the wisdom of life.” I regard its larger thesis—that “Each person completely touches us / With what he is and as he is, / In the stale grandeur of annihilation” (430)—as a more mature and more nuanced version of his earlier statement in “Sunday Morning” that “Death is the mother of beauty” (55). Although that earlier poem may well have had some political and philosophical responses to “The Great War,” as James Longenbach has shown, “Lebensweisheitspielerei” has behind it the Great War, the Great Depression, World War II, the rise of new cartels—the whole surprising disillusionment of the twentieth century as well as Stevens’ own advancing age.

Here, “The proud and the strong / Have departed” (429)—as opposed to the many earlier poems of the “major man,” the proud man of “The Comedian as the Letter C,” the “noble rider,” even the “virile poet.” In this late poem, “Those that are left” in this “dwindled sphere” are “the unaccomplished,” but the “finally human” (429). In this poem, Stevens has abandoned his recourse to the “large and less human” (247) figure of “Examination of the Hero in a Time of War,” among others, and, after concluding in “Esthétique du Mal” that “Pain is human” (277)—and after despairing in “Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit” that we are in fact losing our humanity—this late poem finds in the poverty of “autumnal space” (430), not the autumnal ripeness that satisfied the romantic Keats, but the empty place that makes intimacy, even meaning, possible, however brief, however temporary that may be.

The softly spoken, tenuous connection articulated in this poem leads me to my second choice, “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour.” Instead of the poverty of autumnal space, a small room becomes the place where intimacy and meaning become possible. As we “Light the first light of evening,” we “collect ourselves, / Out of all the indifferences, into one thing,” and in that togetherness, or community, we create something that ignites a kind of communion, in which “being there together is enough” (444). Once again, it is because “we are poor” that we can imagine or ac-

knowledge “A light, a power, the miraculous influence” (444), however precarious or tentative that acknowledgement may be proffered.

This very well-known poem—John Ashbery’s favorite poem, as I recall—opens for me the splendor of the final poem I have chosen: “Two Letters.” Rarely discussed, it is a two-part poem, the first of which is called “A Letter From,” written presumably by a male to a female, only to be followed by the second, “A Letter To,” presumably (and finally) written by that female principle, so long desired and so fearfully withheld throughout Stevens’ corpus, back to him.

The first letter opens with “Even if there had been a crescent moon” (468) and goes on to describe a celestial perfection of the heavens (“crystals’ light”), only to conclude, “One would have wanted more—more—more—” (468–69). As opposed to the celestial poverty of “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour,” this poem imagines the possibility of something close to embodied perfection, realized in the natural world, only to deflate that possibility with lines sounding much like those in the earlier “The Poems of Our Climate.” There Stevens had written, “Still one would want more, one would need more, / More than a world of white and snowy scents,” concluding, that because of our “never-resting mind,” we recognize again that our temporal condition is our ironic consolation, that, as in “Sunday Morning,” “The imperfect is our paradise” (179). But in this late poem, the “more” that is wanted, even in the face of near perfection seen for once in the natural world, is “Some true interior to which to return, / A home against one’s self,” in which one would be “Free from everything else, free above all from thought” (469). Stevens says that such a moment would be

like lighting a candle,
Like leaning on the table, shading one’s eyes,
And hearing a tale one wanted intensely to hear,

As if we were all seated together again
And one of us spoke and all of us believed
What we heard and the light, though little, was enough.
(469)

There is a subtle shift here from “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour” in what provides “enough,” including references (through the “table”) to many other earlier Stevens poems, and especially to the earlier “Of Modern Poetry.” In contrast to the isolation of the actor on the stage, listening to himself, here that act is shifted once again to one of genuine community and communion.

But that is not the end. What follows this remarkable letter is another, of twelve brief lines, which seem to be, finally, the actual words of the female principle that troubled and animated much of the best, but also some-

times some of the most sexist, of Stevens' verse (and, perhaps, his essays as well). As opposed to the famous "sister of the Minotaur," somehow "still half-beast and somehow more than human" (675) in "The Figure of the Youth as a Virile Poet," as opposed to the élite, the "woman with the hair of a pythoness" (661) of "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," to whom Stevens says poetry should be addressed, as opposed to "the thing on his breast, / The hating woman" (388), or the counterpart, the idealized "Sister and mother and diviner love" (70), as opposed even to "Death is the mother of beauty," this female "wanted a holiday," a moment of communication "Not having to do with love":

She wanted a holiday
With someone to speak her dulcied native tongue,

In the shadows of a wood . . .
Shadows, woods . . . and the two of them in speech,

In a secrecy of words
Opened out within a secrecy of place,

Not having to do with love.
A land would hold her in its arms that day

Or something much like a land.
The circle would no longer be broken but closed.

The miles of distance away
From everything would end. It would all meet. (469)

The traditional domain of the female principle—"mother earth"—is shifted here and instead becomes a male place of masculine comfort and safety for a female presence that is recognized and finally heard. Such "reality" would ironically be a "holiday"—a holiday from male projections and distortions of the female (including actual mothers)—which in turn have distorted the male, even Stevens himself. This then is a poem that, with the previous two described, achieves a great summation of Stevens' entire poetic enterprise and culminates in one moment of completion, even transcendence.

University of Notre Dame

STEPHEN BURT

ASKED TO CHOOSE THREE of Wallace Stevens' poems, I select "Debris of Life and Mind," "Late Hymn from the Myrrh-Mountain," and "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour." All are late poems; all represent a

style more personal, but less colorful, less immediately attractive to most undergraduates, than those of *Harmonium*, and less obviously attractive to the academy than those of Stevens' writings of the 1930s and early 1940s, which respond often to challenges that Stevens found in public events. The late writings look more like challenges to himself, poems about loneliness and consolation, about the failures of poetry to comfort, and about its qualified successes. All three of my selections become poems of loneliness, about a woman who may not respond, or may not say the right thing if she does. They are poems that seek (but may not find) companionship, and poems of maturity, if not poems of fatigue. All three use blank verse; one is a quasi-sonnet in seven couplets, another a longer set of couplets, the last in tercets. The poems give three ways to consider the loneliness that Stevens' starkest late style describes.

"Debris of Life and Mind" looks backward. Stevens looks to his past, discovers that he cannot reach it, and then looks almost desperately to a future in which he might look backward again. "There is so little that is close and warm. / It is as if we were never children" (295). Adulthood is cold and isolating in part because it makes childhood seem so far away, so unlike what we know now. (Stevens published the poem in 1945, when childhood might have seemed especially far away: the last of his siblings, Elizabeth, died in 1943.) Short sentences graph resignations and frustrated longings: the imperfective present tense of the self-contained opening lines, each a single decasyllabic sentence, implies that Stevens' distance from his own past, our distance from our own remembered intimacies, has no end and no relief.

Stevens shifts into the imperative mode: "Sit in the room." Does he speak to himself, or to another human being (his wife, for example), or to an imagined reader, or to the interior paramour named in other poems? Stevens plays in these sad, nearly desperate couplets with Keatsian contrasts among the advancing day, with its sunset and sunrise; the advancing year, in which spring becomes summer, and winter spring; and the advance of a life, in which change is never reversed. We cannot go back to the intimacies of childhood, nor to the brighter sunlight of an earlier day. We can do little about that inability except to stay up all night awaiting the sun, a "bright red woman," whose triumph over the horizon, in "violent golds" (296), takes up the longest sentence in the poem. We may imagine Elsie (known in youth for her beautiful hair) as the sun, imagined (but never present) when Stevens awakens; we may see the anticipated sun, the anticipated consolation, as any sort of companionship that might help us make sense of our own lives. But sunrise, when the beloved arrives, belongs only to an imagined future. The poem ends when Stevens turns back to the present and to the absent past. "Stay here. Speak of familiar things a while" (296). The request is a pun, and a desperate if not an impossible plea: the most "familiar" things come from the family we knew in childhood, and they are what Stevens has just said that "we" cannot have.

"Late Hymn from the Myrrh-Mountain" is a happier poem, and a stranger one too. It tries hard to look not forward nor backward but outward, to the surroundings that pleased Stevens first, if not most. Here, those surroundings are themselves remembered, parts of his native eastern Pennsylvania. Myrrh suggests the Song of Solomon and the magi who travel to Bethlehem, but this honored destination is also American, Neversink being at once Neversink Mountain, near Reading, Pennsylvania and (in Eleanor Cook's words) "a place of constancy (not one where hearts sink)" (*Reader's Guide* 199). George Lensing (following Thomas Lombardi) has described the mountain's unusual, "feminine" (345) river bend. "Madonna" is also, Lensing notes, a hairstyle. The portmanteau words and puns in the opening lines flirt with readers and with the landscape, "as if a snood held a snack," Cook writes, "or as if snood were a past participle of which the present imperative form might be snack" (*Word-Play* 19).

This initially playful poem might be Stevens' night version of "To Autumn," as "Sunday Morning" was his daytime version (despite the "darkness" of its close). It is a poem of late life, of day becoming night, "the green bird of summer" (305) becoming the colors of fall. The lover at evening looks forward to the sunrise and the dew ("the fluid thing") of the following day. On that day—described in the longest sentence, the central six lines—Stevens, and his companion, and the mountain (which may be the companion) will be one day older. They already feel old—"not / The early constellations," not "the first / Illustrious intimations" (305), not the unselfconscious powers in "Credences of Summer."

Yet the poem manages not to despair about age. Instead, Stevens keeps one eye on the landscape, on how the stars arrange themselves in the sky, on how dew looks ("tips of artifice" [305], as if a divinity had placed them there), on what kind of grass will eventually turn brown. It is a poem of what Edward O. Wilson calls "biophilia," an instinctively gratifying human "focus on life and lifelike processes," and of topophilia, companionship found in a place (1). It is a late, a belated hymn, and yet a hymn. The poem may end in awe or apprehension, as the "shadow of an external world"—the outer exigencies that threaten all paired and secluded lovers—may efface or disable or simply color the pleasures that "external world" (305) has for us.

I picked "Late Hymn from the Myrrh-Mountain" to emphasize its qualified hopes; in picking "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," I emphasize its doubts. That famous poem has given countless readers some consolation; indeed, Stevens seems to have wanted it to do so, calling it "an extremely good poem with which to wind up" (to place at the end of) his English *Selected Poems* (L 734). Yet its consolation (as often in late Stevens) is difficult, qualified, double-edged. If Stevens has written a poem of hope, it is hope of a tenuous, *faute de mieux*, if not counterfactual, kind.

Many good readers think otherwise. For Milton Bates it is a "credo [whose] effects are immediate and profoundly satisfying" (60). For Jac-

queline Vaught Brogan the poem provides “the occasion . . . in which the masculine and feminine principles are finally fully integrated,” the triumphant ending to a struggle with gender roles (in effect, with sexism) throughout the earlier oeuvre (189). Barbara Fisher goes further: it is for her “the only poem in the [Stevens] canon that resolves in complete sufficiency” (86). Most exegeses imply, as B. J. Leggett says, “that Stevens is elevating the human imagination to the level of God” (49). Leggett finds, instead, a more conventional, religious affirmation. For him, “God is in fact the imaginer,” so that the final tercets convey “the speaker’s sense of being in touch with God” (49). Leggett ignores the element of loneliness, of marital disillusion, that comes with the man contemplating his candle alone. A draft, as Leggett notes, says, “How high that highest candle lights the world!” (L 701). Stevens removed “the world” as he revised.

The credo from notebooks, “God and the imagination are one” (914), receives dramatic context here. The sentence emerges from (lives within, is or is not consumed by) the flame of a candle alone at night. It would take a miracle for a man, or a paramour, to live happily here. Perhaps the imagination can provide one. The credo, the candle, the paramour, the poem thus carry sad overtones that ought not cancel, but should complement, the readings that focus so often on what Stevens, and Stevens’ readers, have wanted to believe. “The realization of an ultimate good,” as Joseph Carroll says, “depends on an act of will that barely escapes being cancelled by Stevens’ recognition of its arbitrariness,” though even Carroll finds, in the end, “a sense of transcendental plenitude” (310), rather than the pathos of a tenuous, flickering sufficiency.

We can see that pathos in the syntax. Stevens’ long sentences aim not backward, into his own past, nor outward, into a landscape, but inward: the only paramour he can imagine, the only one who will listen to him, is the interior paramour, the substitute eros that an introspective psyche must fashion (cannot simply find) for itself. We have here the somewhat Paterian Stevens who makes his claims on behalf of the imagination, and (in the same phrases) on behalf of moment-to-moment experience, “being there together” (444) with one’s own sense of the world; but we have, too, the poet whom Helen Vendler called “a despairing lover, blaming himself for the failure in love, blaming his wife . . . and finally, in *The Rock*, blaming only the biological necessity that brings men and women together” and that leaves them with phantoms instead (32).

It is “for small reason”—for the logically frail reason that we need to believe it, to live as if it were so—that we can think “The world imagined is the ultimate good.” Such a belief is the “single shawl / Wrapped tightly round us, since we are poor” (444). If we come to know, through the imagination, through imagined companionship, “an order, a whole,” that order remains obscure. If we say “God and the imagination are one,” if such a hypothesis is our “highest candle,” it flares amid—and does not dispel—“the dark” (444). The “highest candle” is, moreover, an idea; it is not the

sun, not a person, not any of the heroic or metaphysical goals that have consoled other poets, that consoled Stevens in his other moods, nor the antimetaphysical, physical, Earthly experience toward which his earlier poems asked us to turn. The reader does not even become the book—he may have nothing to read (as Stevens himself, in his last years, sometimes preferred not to read). Even to stay up late with this “interior paramour” might be, for Stevens, an unattainable wish. He complained not long after he had written the poem, in more than one letter, that he often had to “go to bed after dinner and call it a day” (L 763).

“Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour” thus looks back to “Debris of Life and Mind,” in which the poet imagined himself staying up till dawn. It uses, like the earlier poem, a “we” that might refer to the poet and the interior paramour, but that might also take in the poet and his readers, each of whom—like Matthew Arnold’s “mortal millions” in “To Marguerite: Continued”—remains in the deepest sense alone. A “final soliloquy” is by definition a last speech to oneself, an expression of loneliness, whether of the poet himself or of some other figure called the paramour. Stevens’ final soliloquy is an elegant demonstration that we need a kind of companionship we might never get, and cannot in any case keep. If we cannot have it outside ourselves to our satisfaction, we need to imagine it; we need to try. We “collect ourselves” (as you might collect yourself, get yourself together, after the shock of bad news) only within the “single shawl” of a hopeful or willful belief. We “feel the obscurity of an order” that sustains that belief, an order that may (since it has no metaphysical justification, no warrant outside the self) collapse at any time.

We should, indeed, cherish the poem’s concluding major chord. But we should also see how “being there together is enough,” at the end of a “soliloquy,” admits dramatic irony. It sounds like a man who must convince himself, who speaks through a delicate mask. If we set the poem beside the quiet delights of, say, “The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm,” we should also set it beside “Debris of Life and Mind,” and even beside that earlier masterwork of blank verse about self-deception, loneliness, and unrequited love, Robert Browning’s “Andrea del Sarto,” which Stevens certainly knew, and which may also be a source for “As You Leave the Room”: “A common greyness silvers everything. . . . As if I saw alike my work and self / And all that I was born to be and do, / A twilight-piece.” Silver-gray, twilight: the color of the final soliloquy, too, until the room grows dark, and the color (no gold, “nothing of the sun”) of the second best, of artifice, of a conscious replacement for someone or something that nature will not provide.

But to end only with such a bleak comparison is to falsify Stevens’ tone. Instead, I return to the question of who speaks the poem. We have not a final soliloquy (a last speech to oneself) as if to the interior paramour, but a final soliloquy of her, written for her to speak to herself, a soliloquy whose only pronoun is “we,” and a speech that may end in a house made of air.

Sharon Cameron, who also connects “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour” to “Debris of Life and Mind,” rightly emphasizes how conclusively Stevens’ speaker remains alone: “he is not feeling loneliness,” she says, but “solitude” (600). “Solitude,” says Hannah Arendt, “is that human situation in which I keep myself company. Loneliness comes about when I am alone without being able to split up into the two-and-one” (185), into the gendered duo, poet and paramour, proposer and answerer, maintained at last—but maintained so precariously—here. A dramatic irony, even in this relatively happy poem, nonetheless emphasizes the fragility of the lines between silver and mere gray, between dwelling and mere confinement, between the solitary imaginer and the lonely man. We hear what Stevens imagines or wishes that the interior paramour might say, and—since she is he, or part of him, his “interior”—she speaks alone. In doing so, she makes the case, not for domestic companionship, but for “the world imagined”—a weak case, perhaps, with “small reason,” a hard place to rest (as in “I rest my case”), and yet all he can give. Perhaps it is all we need.

Harvard University

ELEANOR COOK

YEARS AGO, WHEN I FIRST BEGAN to pay serious attention to Wallace Stevens’ work, he sometimes made me impatient because he could appear unduly abstract. Now, I cannot trust myself to read some poems aloud in public, for fear I will burst into tears. That is why I did not quote more of “The River of Rivers in Connecticut” when I recently gave a paper. To be sure, bursting into tears is only a partial answer to abstraction. Nor is it a guarantee of a good poem. Quite the contrary. Sentimental writing can make us tearful more easily than great or good art.

But as it happens, “The River of Rivers in Connecticut” is a great poem indeed, and it is my first choice. I will mention only two reasons. First is the rhythm, that slowly building, pulsing, river rhythm that may be found in many water poems: “Slow, slow, fresh fount, keep time with my salt tears” (Ben Jonson, “Slow, slow fresh fount”); “The unplumb’d, salt, estranging sea” (Matthew Arnold, “To Marguerite: Continued”). Any rhythmic river poem recalls deep in our mind’s ear other such river poems as “Ol’ Man River,” even “Row, Row, Row Your Boat.” And rhythm for me would always be a reason for a favorite Stevens poem: “Time is a horse that runs in the heart, a horse / Without a rider on a road at night. / The mind sits listening and hears it pass” (“The Pure Good of Theory” [289]). “Tinsel in February, tinsel in August. / There are things in a man besides his reason. / Come home, wind, he kept crying and crying” (“Pieces” [306]). Or the ragtime rhythm of “So WHAT said the OTHERS and the SUN WENT DOWN” (“Mrs. Alfred Uruguay” [225]; my emphasis). You can doubtless add other favorites.

Second and related is Stevens' use of an actual river, the Connecticut River, which is permeated by older, mythic rivers. The poem refers to the river Styx at the start—the river we cross at death as we journey to Hades—that last river, like the river Jordan. The river Styx is memorable from classical tradition, say, Virgil on Aeneas' trip to the underworld. The river Jordan is memorable from Christian tradition, say, the African-American spiritual "Deep River," or the end of *Pilgrim's Progress*, part II, where the pilgrims cross the river, each in his or her own way. The final mysterious river "that flows nowhere, like a sea" (451) reverberates against T. S. Eliot's river circulation in "Dry Salvages," while also recalling Oceanus, the river surrounding the earth in classical cosmography, as depicted on Achilles' famous shield. Stevens drew a diagram of the shield in a college textbook, lettering in the name "Oceanus." Stevens, like W. B. Yeats, is one of the great poets of old age.

Though Stevens could make me impatient at the start, I always liked his sense of humor. So my second poem would be one that displays Stevens' often quirky and often mixed sense of humor. Senses of humor are notoriously individual. Rhythm appeals widely to human beings, but nobody can count on even a friend's sharing a sense of humor. Here are a few samples of the zany Stevens that I like a lot: "The squirming facts exceed the squamous mind, / If one may say so" ("Connoisseur of Chaos" [195]). "In Hydaspia, by Howzen / Lived a lady, Lady Lowzen" ("Oak Leaves Are Hands" [243]). "The cat hawks it / And the hawk cats it" ("Things of August" [418]). My samples are lines or phrases detached from their poems. For an entire poem, I would choose "Analysis of a Theme" for the sake of its last stanza:

We enjoy the ithy oonts and long-haired
Plomets, as the Herr Gott
Enjoys his comets. (305)

For the third poem, I would want something meaty, something that I am still chewing on, preferably a poem where Stevens meditates on his art, probably something in his familiar high style. "The Motive for Metaphor" would be a possible choice, but I have chosen another metaphor poem that is still under-read, "Prologues to What Is Possible." This is a poem that remains mysterious and so beckons to me, just as something beckons to the man in the boat. Here are a few scattered lines:

There was an ease of mind that was like being alone in a boat
at sea,
A boat carried forward by waves resembling the bright backs
of rowers. . . .

The boat was built of stones that had lost their weight and being no longer heavy
Had left in them only a brilliance, of unaccustomed origin. . . .
(437)

Incidentally, the legend of St. James the Greater says he traveled to Spain on a stone boat, led by angels. I suspect that Stevens knew the legend, which also happens to lie behind a recent novel by José Saramago, *The Stone Raft*.

The metaphor stirred his fear. . . .

What self, for example, did he contain that had not yet been loosed,
Snarling in him for discovery . . .

.....
A name and privilege over the ordinary of his commonplace—

A flick which added to what was real and its vocabulary,
The way some first thing coming into Northern trees
Adds to them the whole vocabulary of the South. . . . (438–39)

I recently returned from an annual trip to watch the spring bird migration, when first things do come into northern trees. And yes, a scarlet tanager does add “the whole vocabulary of the South.” Stevens’ apparent abstractions can come suddenly alive in this way, as this magnificent poem about his art knows well.

University of Toronto

ALAN FILREIS

OF LATE, THE WALLACE STEVENS I admire is anxiously stuck—stuck and yet writing about it. He is entangled in an idiom he had come to accept, and attempts, in the very words we read, to write his way into another. Or he is seeking to reformulate his argument in the process of making it. Or he believed he has come to the end of the imagination, beyond which is a poetics of blank wordlessness. Or he partly but insufficiently recognizes that the counterargument made against his poetics has made its way into the poem and gotten the better of him.

Stevens was remarkably smart about these predicaments, and he continued to escape them. Asked to commend just three poems, I have chosen a trio of such expressions of quandary and near-cessation: “Mozart, 1935,” the twentieth canto of “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” and “The Plain Sense of Things.” In the third poem, a late one, the imagination re-emerges at precisely the point of its termination. Just as his poetic ar-

gument fails, in the second, and he ventures into pure sound, the sound begins to claim a responsiveness in such semantic evacuation. In the first poem, Stevens wonders who other than himself will be permitted to play the music of a time of suffering, even as he presents a contemporaneous instance. Infamous for his capacity to “dodge the apprehension of severe pain in others,” as Mark Halliday puts it in *Stevens and the Interpersonal*, Stevens nonetheless sought and slowly acquired methods for putting the pain of others in such a place that the poem can hardly look away even while the speaker is enacting some version of the dodge. This convergence, says Halliday, “produces not only fascination but also an instinctive . . . sense of imperiously required response” (14). It might be—or at any rate might be like—a function of desire, the anxiety modeled on erotic longing. Halliday contends this, as a means, in part, of finding a personal motive in Stevens for the simultaneous exploration of abnegation and responsiveness. “[T]he apprehension of suffering in others,” Halliday writes, “is like sexual desire for another person—a . . . kind of importuning of the self which generated great anxiety in Stevens” (14). “Transforming is what art does,” writes Susan Sontag in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, but art that depicts the calamitous “is much criticized if it seems ‘aesthetic’; that is, too much like art” (76).

Few Stevens poems convey as much fear of the personal poetic dead end as “Mozart, 1935,” or present as anxiously the risk of accusations of aestheticism in the face of crisis. Indeed, Halliday’s quoted comments are to be found in his interpretation of that poem, where he argues that Stevens refuses to explore “this besieging pain” (107) felt by those assailing him from the streets of 1935, because he is more interested in “writing about the problem of writing about the street” (15). I do not disagree about the self-referentiality here but rather with Halliday’s assumption that the more the poem obsesses over its own problem of representation the less responsive to others’ pain it is. As Sontag suggests, art that regards the pain of others is rarely straightforward. Even works of direct-gaze documentary mode—perhaps especially them—can be assailed for daring to “transform[]” the atrocity conveyed. The involution is not so much a turning away as a necessary examination of aesthetic means.

“Mozart, 1935” is not an impersonal poem. Its imperatives (“be seated,” “Play the present,” “Be seated,” “Be thou the voice” [107]) do seem to create in its words what Halliday calls an “imperiously required response” (14), but this language manifests impersonality only if the speaker and the pianist are deemed to be separated by a distance—of time or ideology. If the speaker and pianist agree that the artist ought ideally to be free to play whatever music he wants, regardless of the demands of the era, it might be that the speaker is hanging the pianist out to dry, giving him over to the riotous detractors. But I think not. This is a crisis poem, not a complaint, and it is about the poet’s situation. If the speaker and the pianist are one, it becomes a poem of desperately refigured identity. If it is Stevens and not

the dictatorial voice of the mid-1930s who demands (so of himself) that the voice be that “of angry fear, / The voice of besieging pain” (107), then the final “return to Mozart” (108) unironically holds the possibility of a Stevensian art admitting into the language of the poem itself the percussive sounds of stones thrown upon the roof—by the angry destitute mass, bearing claims against aestheticism that Sontag aptly dismisses as inconsistent with any theory of documentary art bearing witness to pain. Go ahead and play, the poem says to the poet. “The divertimento” is Halliday’s dodge. As a “lucid souvenir of the past,” it is relevant to the pain of feeling one’s art’s irrelevance, until at the dead end of such thought a new path beckons, when “we may return to Mozart,” now newly conscious of the age (“1935” when “the streets are full of cries”) and of our own age (“we are old”) (107–08).

Whatever other dangers to the continuation of his poetic project are signaled by the writing of “Mozart, 1935,” the sounds of stones upon the roof do not finally become the sounds the poem makes when one reads it, nor is its line-by-line style any sort of threat to the wholeness of *Ideas of Order*. Its imperative is of a piece with “hear the poet’s prayer” (“Sailing after Lunch” [99]). Its political rhetoric is, at moments, just as obvious as “Whoever founded / A state that was free, in the dead of winter, from mice?” (“Dance of the Macabre Mice” [101]). Its figuration of the street-smart detractors is constructed of *Harmonium*-style satire updated to the Depression and is only somewhat less ironic than

How does one stand
To behold the sublime,
To confront the mockers,
The mickey mockers
And plated pairs? (“The American Sublime” [106])

But *Owl’s Clover* (1936) and *The Man with the Blue Guitar & Other Poems* (1937) succeeded *Ideas of Order* (1936), and once it became clear that the dense blank-verse satire of “Owl’s Clover” was insufficient rejoinder, in itself, to real and imagined criticisms, “The Man with the Blue Guitar” sought in its relentless variations to give form as well as content to the detractors’—and thus to Stevens’ own—concerns.

In the first nineteen cantos of “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” an antithetical subject position—a voice decrying the manner of the poem—variously exchanges arguments with the speaker/poet-guitarist. After the first six cantos, the positions switch, merge, quote each other, swap, and role play, so that by the poem’s middle it has become impossible to tell the power of the counterargument to affect the poem’s outcome, which is nothing less than the ability, and the very right, to discern when in poetry “we [can] choose to play / The imagined pine, the imagined jay” (151). I respect those who contend that the turning point is in canto XXIII (“A few final solutions” [145]) or in canto XXII (“Poetry is the subject of the poem”

[144]) and those who argue that the way out is found in the contemplation of Picasso's reconciliation of twentieth-century atrocity, dehumanization, social art, and modernism in canto XV: "Is this picture of Picasso's, this 'hoard / Of destructions,' a picture of ourselves, / Now, an image of our society?" (141). But even there the compelling problem is whether and how a poem as a work of writing can sustain the posing of such questions. In all modernist poetry there is no better example of the politics of experimental form. The answer to the famous question, "Things as they are have been destroyed. / Have I?" will depend on the answer to this one: "Am I a man that is dead[?] . . . / Is my thought a memory, not alive?" (142).

Canto XX asks something of the same question—"What is there in life except one's ideas[?]" (144)—with a significant difference. It is here, I think, that the poem turns from back-and-forth counter-polemics about art and social responsibility to a mature poetics of (dis)belief that takes writing to the edge of noncommunication without the least bit relinquishing the human. It is Stevens at his most linguistically experimental. The long poem seems to grind to a halt, to retreat into nonsense, to babble with a radically minimal vocabulary, to make a few simple and non-resonant words talismanic, to exhaust the variational mode itself. "No poet," Helen Vendler writes of this canto, "could keep this up for long" (125).

What is there in life except one's ideas,
Good air, good friend, what is there in life?

Is it ideas that I believe?
Good air, my only friend, believe,

Believe would be a brother full
Of love, believe would be a friend,

Friendlier than my only friend,
Good air. Poor pale, poor pale guitar . . . (144)

Formally, this is the opposite of the turgid paragraph-like stanzas of "Owl's Clover," even though its dilemma is the same. What a paradoxical discovery: at "the utmost edge of intelligibility," as Vendler says, in a poem of almost pure sound ("The monotonous continuo of a strumming guitar" [124]), Stevens counterintuitively realizes the power of belief in ideas—ideas being that one human possession conventionally deemed dependent on semantic meaning. In one sense, the answer in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" to the question, "Is it ideas that I believe?" is "No. This is a poem of pure song." In another, profounder sense, the idea is the "good air" of the sound of the poem's words, and the one and only good friend is the guitar, the radical constraint or language rule of minimal vocabulary, "a challenge," Vendler writes, "resembling the tour de force of a single

image with variations that he had carried out in looking at the blackbird or the sea surface full of clouds" (124). The poem that would seem to be in the political line is really a significant modernist next step, an inheritor of the most assiduously innovative early modernism of *Harmonium*: the impressionism-gone-awry of "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," the sound-concreteness of ditties such as "Bantams in Pine-Woods" and "Depression Before Spring," the cubism of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." Composing this poem reminds the poet that one form of improvisation is constraint. The potential botch of "The Man with the Blue Guitar," subsumed by putative doubts about its directionless extemporized style, is rescued at the moment when in line 4 "believe" becomes an intransitive verb, and then, amazingly, a noun that brings forward the intransitive sense, non-attachment. "Good air, my only friend, believe." Then: "Believe would be a brother full / Of love, believe would be a friend. . . ." Thus the potentially abortive self-pity of the final line—"Poor pale, poor pale guitar"—becomes a triumph of aspirational release.

Years later, "The Plain Sense of Things" grapples with verbal limitation imposed by another factor—age—in addition to the usual seasonal downturn, autumn into winter. It is a time of failed memory and linguistic infacility: "It is difficult even to choose the adjective / For this blank cold" (428). Invention has become difficult. "It is as if / We had come to the end of the imagination" (428). Hints of rescue are here already, in the phrase "as if." The greenhouse needs paint and the chimney tilts. The poem has the nostalgia and retrospective spirit of several other late poems (for instance: "Ariel was glad he had written his poems" [450]), but the analogy between the coming wintry domestic landscape and the "WHOLE OF HARMONIUM" (L 831), the overall Stevensian project, is nowhere more explicit than here. As Ezra Pound, near the end, decided *The Cantos* was a "botch" (qtd. in Wilhelm 342), so Stevens concludes that "A fantastic effort has failed." "The great structure has become a minor house" (428).

Once again, linguistic infacility as a theme makes the poem's language falter. Of course, the adjective finally selected to modify "cold" is "blank," a dazzlingly good plain-sense choice, so already there are hints of the control alleged to have been lost. Does one need to have full imaginative powers to choose "blank" for "cold"? No. Perhaps the poet's imagination is dead after all, despite the present poem.

Yet this blankness, this end-state, can constitute a poetics, and the end of the imagination is itself one of those things that the imagination alone has the power to imagine. It is not just "the great pond" on this declined estate that has "to be imagined," but also "The plain sense of it" itself, "without reflections" (428). In the same way that canto XX of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" represents an advance from early modernism's imposition of limits, "The Plain Sense of Things" takes Stevens an important step beyond the thoughtlessness-as-thought strategy of poems such as "The Snow Man" and "No Possum, No Sop, No Taters" and "Disillusionment of Ten

O'Clock." The "inevitable knowledge" here is that the turning-point "Yet" ("Yet the absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined" [428]) derives inexorably from failure, from breakdowns in the structure of the larger linguistic project, and from the human beauty of such incoherences.

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Notes

¹Wallace Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 107. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with page number(s) only in parentheses.

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Poems

Thirteen Ways of Looking at Wallace Stevens

I

The sun is the country wherever he is. The bird
In the brightest landscape downwardly revolves
Disdaining each astringent ripening . . .

II

It is he, anew, in a freshened youth
And it is he in the substance of his region,
Wood of his forests and stone out of his fields
Or from under his mountains.

III

The world washed in his imagination,
The world was a shore, whether sound or form
Or light, the relic of farewells,
Rock, of valedictory echoings . . .

IV

He did not quail. A man so used to plumb
The multifarious heavens felt no awe
Before these visible, voluble delugings,
Which yet found means to set his simmering mind
Spinning and hissing with oracular
Notations of the wild, the ruinous waste . . .

V

All his speeches are prodigies in longer phrases.
His thoughts begotten at clear sources,
Apparently in air, fall from him
Like chantering from an abundant
Poet, as if he thought gladly, being
Compelled thereto by an innate music.

VI

His rarities are ours: may they be fit
And reconcile us to our selves in those
True reconcilings, dark, pacific words,
And the adroiter harmonies of their fall.

VII

Life fixed him, wandering on the stair of glass,
With its attentive eyes. And, as he stood,
On his balcony, outsensing distances,
There were looks that caught him out of empty air.

VIII

He says yes
To no; and in saying yes he says farewell.
He measures the velocities of change.
He leaps from heaven to heaven more rapidly
Than bad angels leap from heaven to hell in flames.

IX

He opens the door of his house
On flames. The scholar of one candle sees
An Arctic effulgence flaring on the frame
Of everything he is.

X

He breathed in crystal-pointed change the whole
Experience of night, as if he breathed
A consciousness from solitude, inhaled
A freedom out of silver-shaping size,
Against the whole experience of day.

XI

He disposes the world in categories, thus:
The peopled and the unpeopled. In both, he is
Alone. But in the peopled world, there is,
Besides the people, his knowledge of them. In
The unpeopled, there is his knowledge of himself.

XII

His question is complete because it contains
His utmost statement. It is his own array,
His own pageant and procession and display . . .

XIII

Flame, sound, fury composed . . . Hear what he says,
The dauntless master, as he starts the human tale.

JB Kennedy
Redondo Beach, Calif.

An Old Man

*The two worlds are asleep, are sleeping, now.
A dumb sense possesses them in a kind of solemnity . . .*
—Wallace Stevens, “An Old Man Asleep”

Alert and present in all his hours
—easy to keep count of—
undecided between the thicket of his past
—difficult to negotiate—
and the voices of early morning
simply speaking the world

—but what’s the time? he finds himself wondering,
as again and again he awakes.

Carlo Vita
Lavagna, Italy
Trans. Massimo Bacigalupo

A Low-Toned Young Christian Woman

I
give in,
sometimes, to sin,
which makes me sing.
I ask where’s the sting
you say sin brings. Would you string
me up because the saints are staring?
I do less harm than a starling
though you, I notice, find my strut startling.

T. P. Perrin
Binghamton, N.Y.

if it comes back, life comes back . . .

A star, fragile, easy
to neglect, flashes, recedes
into clouds, bobs,
dangles there: when

it shines over
Germany, Africa, over
Cambodia, the Balkans,
it keeps the slowness

of its cold fire.
Something aloft makes
the land of broken glass,
steel rubble and

barbed wire resemble
the land at peace: over
New York, Prague, a
fugitive star burns still.

Robert Dorsett
Berkeley, Calif.

Reviews

Wallace Stevens: Selected Poems.

Edited by John N. Serio. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009.

When Faber and Faber, Ltd. in London finally agreed to publish a selection of Wallace Stevens' poetry in 1951, the editors, including T. S. Eliot, wanted Stevens to choose the poems for inclusion. He demurred on the grounds that British sensibilities were different from American: "I think that it would be a mistake for any one over here to make the selection" (Stevens to Herbert Weinstock, October 10, 1951). In response, Eliot proposed that their mutual friend Marianne Moore choose the poems, but Stevens, learning that Faber offered no remuneration for such services, reluctantly agreed to select the poems. (The book appeared in 1953.) A year before the Faber invitation was extended, his American publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, wanted to publish a "collected poems," and Stevens, thinking it premature, agreed instead to a "selected poems." He reluctantly agreed to make the selection to include poems from *Harmonium* through *The Auroras of Autumn*, his most recent volume. The project never came to fruition. Finally, in 1954, on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday, he agreed to a collected poems published by Knopf, withholding nonetheless his longest poem, "Owl's Clover." Earlier, in 1938, when one of his previous publishers proposed a collected volume—though it, too, never reached publication—Stevens said, "I might want to eliminate a few things: for instance, I think that THE COMEDIAN AS THE LETTER C has gathered a good deal of dust" (L 330). In the year of his death he told Oscar Williams that the poem "Mrs. Alfred Uruguay" was "questionable" (Stevens to Oscar Williams, January 28, 1955). Williams wanted to include it in his *The New Pocket Anthology of American Verse*. These scattered instances of Stevens-selecting-Stevens come to mind as one imagines John N. Serio, also approached by Alfred A. Knopf to make the choices for a selected volume, asking himself, "But what to include, what to exclude?"

There is surely no one better able to undertake the task. Serio has edited a collection of Stevens' poetry for young people, edited an annotated secondary bibliography, and co-edited an online concordance of Stevens. His co-editing of *Teaching Wallace Stevens: Practical Essays* in 1994 and, two years ago, his editing of the *Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens* have produced two indispensable works in Stevens studies. In addition, as longtime president of the Wallace Stevens Society, he selects the organizers of and topics for panels on Stevens at annual scholarly conferences. But it is in the more than a quarter century of editing the biannual *The Wallace Stevens Journal* that he has presided over publication of the consistently best work on Stevens. If Stevens has benefited from the distinguished work of many diversely astute critics, editors, and biographers, surely the lion's share of that work has, in one way or another, been guided and shaped by John Serio.

His "Introduction" to this edition consists of only eleven pages, but I will recommend it to my students as perhaps the best concentrated passageway into the work of a poet often difficult to reckon with for first-time readers. Serio's Stevens is the Stevens who points to poems that make us "listen to words when we hear them, loving them and feeling them" as they reach ideally toward "a finality, a perfection, an unalterable vibration, which it is only within the power of the acutest poet to give them" (*Collected Poetry and Prose* 662–63). For Stevens himself that meant that the power of the poetic word and the poet's commitment to it superseded, sometimes substituted for, and sometimes supplanted even his personally complicated relations with family, friends, colleagues at work, and God himself. But such poems do not distance human experience. To the contrary, they "give voice to our own unique, personal, and otherwise tangled inner li[vess]" (xiii). Serio follows Helen Vendler, Harold Bloom, and others in insisting that the work of this poet who appears to some as detached and impersonal is, in fact, profoundly personal. Few artists have ever made a higher claim for the powers of aestheticism. At the same time, in other poems Stevens does not always seek "to move us emotionally," but rather to "spur us intellectually" and to "transform us into introspective voyagers, questioners of our beliefs and certitudes" (xv)—even when they are superficially playful, bizarre, or whimsical. Finally, Serio's Stevens is not explicitly identified as a poet of political immediacy living his life in the troublesome first half of the twentieth century, as others have argued. Yet, Serio affirms, Stevens' insistence on the poem's grounding in the "pure principle" (*Collected Poetry and Prose* 61) of reality constantly "lend[s] emotional import and expressiveness to the outer world" (xiv) in which each of us lives his or her life.

I want to return briefly to the issue of this editor's exclusion and inclusion in selecting the poems themselves. Knopf has allowed him a generous gathering of 159 poems—including "The Comedian as the Letter C," "The Man with the Blue Guitar," "Esthétique du Mal," "Credences of Summer," "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," "The Auroras of Autumn," and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" in their entirety. All the traditional anthology pieces and inevitable choices are here. Each will find a few personal favorites that have been omitted. Mine are "Infanta Marina," "Last Look at the Lilacs," "Depression before Spring," "Stars at Tallapoosa," "Tattoo," "Ghosts as Cocoons," "Variations on a Summer Day," and a few others. But that is playing favorites. And as I have indicated, Stevens himself played favorites as well.

For the earlier proposed but never published Knopf Selected Poems (in which representative poems from *Harmonium* through *The Auroras of Autumn* were to be included), Stevens selected eighty-six poems—thirty of which are not included in Serio's edition. With a few exceptions, I find myself in agreement with Serio's omissions over Stevens' inclusions. It is surprising that, with the longer poems, Stevens did not propose reproducing them in full. For example, for "Esthétique du Mal" he chose only the following sections: III, VII, VIII, XIII, and XIV. (For the complete list of Stevens' selections for the proposed Knopf edition, see my *Wallace Stevens: A Poet's Growth*, chapter 11.)

Thanks to Milton Bates's edition of *Opus Posthumous* and Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson's Library of America edition, most of the inherited varia-

tions and omissions in the texts of poems have been corrected and are now more or less set. I still argue for the inclusion of line 8 ("The stillness that comes to me out of this, beneath . . .) of "Autumn Refrain" as it appeared in its original publication in *Hound and Horn* in 1932. (The line was omitted when the poem was published in *Ideas of Order, Collected Poems*, and, more recently, the Library of America edition, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, as it is omitted here.) I am guessing that it was Knopf's decision to exclude annotations from this edition, yet, for those seeking such marginalia, they can consult the notes in the Library of America edition and Eleanor Cook's helpful *A Reader's Guide to Wallace Stevens*, published two years ago.

I will add that I hope Knopf's next gesture toward making the works of Stevens available (dating back to *Harmonium* in 1923) would be a new and more comprehensive edition of the letters, many of which have come to light since the volume edited by the poet's daughter appeared more than forty years ago.

In the meantime, for those seeking a wide selection of the most important poems by Stevens—without the essays, plays, notebooks, and letters included in the Library of America edition—Serio's edition becomes the standard source, attractively available in a reasonably priced hardback edition, with a biographical chronology and selected bibliography. Introduced and selected by the dean of Stevens studies, the new *Selected Poems* assumes a prominent place on the shelf of primary sources for Wallace Stevens.

George S. Lensing
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Visiting Wallace: Poems Inspired by the Life and Work of Wallace Stevens.
Edited by Dennis Barone and James Finnegan. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009.

It's hard to imagine visiting Wallace Stevens. Visiting Walt Whitman—yes—dropping in on Walt, going for a walk with Walt, having a drink with Walt, but not *Wallace*. And surely one would say *Mr. Stevens*. And arrive only after having received a proper invitation. Donald Hall relates the following story in his collection of American literary anecdotes: "Once Allen Tate, the distinguished poet and man of letters, was at a gathering with Stevens, and he asked if he might drop by for a brief chat when he next came to Hartford. Stevens answered, 'No' " (*The Oxford Book of American Literary Anecdotes* [Oxford UP, 1981] 191–92).

Visiting Wallace: Poems Inspired by the Life and Work of Wallace Stevens seems to be of two minds about its subject—chummy and personal in its title, respectful and formal in its subtitle. The editors are aware of the dangers of their choice; there is "something incongruous about such a title" (xiii), they write in the first sentence of the introduction, adding two paragraphs later that they hope the poems they have chosen are "neither intrusion nor interruption" (xiii). In fact, very few of the seventy-six poems collected here suggest, or at-

tempt, intimacy. This reserve seems appropriate, since of all American poets Stevens is the most powerful emblem of the privacy of the imagination.

There would be no mistaking Walt in life from the way he presented himself in his work; the large expansive "I" of the poems is shared (or appears to be shared) by the man. But Wallace Stevens cleverly disguised himself as an insurance executive; the crazy dancing and singing, all the red weather of invention, was inside. Once (as related in another of Hall's anecdotes) Stevens' daughter came upon her father "in a dark part of the house sitting in a chair in silence, a habit which mystified and frightened her. On this occasion, she watched him for some time, and finally approached his chair, cautiously touched his knee, and asked what he was doing. 'Thinking,' he answered gruffly" (*Literary Anecdotes* 189).

The editors of *Visiting Wallace* are probably correct when they say, "No other American poet . . . has been more influential upon American poets during the past thirty years than Stevens" (xiv). We may be curious about the way Stevens the man thought, but it is the way the *poems* think that makes Stevens a potent muse, a writer's "necessary angel." As Stevens himself writes, the poet "will disclose what he finds in his own poetry by way of the poetry itself" (*CPP* 639). So one should not be surprised, if one were to ask to drop by, to be told: "No." In this book, one ends up visiting not Stevens but the poets who write about him.

Alan Filreis, in his foreword, says that these "seventy-six poems give us seventy-six distinct Stevenses" (xi). That may be a few too many Stevenses, since there are certain particular and definable ways in which the poet's life and work show up here. There are poems of anecdotal remembrance (Richard Eberhart, Carl Sandburg), of playful appropriation, and elegiac tributes, though these tend to move quickly from the man to the work. Edward Hirsch, for example, in "At the Grave of Wallace Stevens," writes:

One pictures him strolling under the umbrella
Pines and buttonwoods on the way to work,

Imagination's largest thinker conjuring up
Songs of human radiance twanging in the mist. (44–45)

Hirsch's title suggests a personal moment, what *he* thought when he visited the grave in "*Section 14, Cedar Hill Cemetery, Hartford, Connecticut*," as the subtitle precisely informs us. But the poem almost immediately—and perhaps appropriately—leaves behind the personal. It begins, "One thinks of the gods dissolving in mid-air" (44), and continues to use "one" until it turns to "we." There is no "I." And when "one thinks," one thinks in Stevens' language. The pleasure of Hirsch's poem—and of many of the poems here—is re-encountering the words of Stevens' poems—"twanging," for example, just that one word, so memorably embedded in "Of Modern Poetry," where the "metaphysician in the dark" is "twanging / An instrument, twanging a wiry string" (*CPP* 219). As soon as Stevens repeats the word it becomes his.

The danger of the poem that borrows from—or samples—Stevens is that the reader may find what is borrowed more interesting than the new poem that contains it; the variations played upon Stevens' "wiry string" may make us long too much for the source. In *Visiting Wallace* there are the inevitable re-workings of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," both clever (Peter Redgrove's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackboard") and dreary (Mark DeFoe's "Thirteen Ways of Eradicating Blackbirds"). A more interesting case is Jeremy Over's "A Poem Is a Pheasant." Over takes the line, "A poem is a pheasant," from Stevens' collection of aphorisms, "Adagia," and then recombines it with other lines from Stevens, some immediately recognizable (Stevens' "Poetry is the joy (gaiety) of language" becomes Over's "A pheasant is the gaiety of language"), some less obvious ("A poem is a café" becomes, of course, "A pheasant is a café" [93]).

This sort of thing can become tiresome quite quickly, and Over is wise not to let his poem go on to a second page. But if one looks back at "Adagia" one finds that Stevens himself returns to that pheasant and the kind of sentence structure that contains it. Moreover, the comic strangeness of the reappearing pheasant plays off of the extraordinary eloquence of some of the adjacent lines. For example, before "A poem is a pheasant," Stevens writes, "The great conquest is the conquest of reality. It is not to present life, for a moment, as it might have been" (*CPP* 907). And "Poetry is a pheasant disappearing in the brush" is preceded by "Ignorance is one of the sources of poetry" (*CPP* 911). Stevens has the last word here, as is appropriate, but before that Over's source overwhelms his own poem.

Stevens has so many wonderfully distinctive and memorable lines it is no surprise that poets would be drawn under the guise of tribute to want to play with them. And of course this is a tribute. Like any great poet, Stevens changed the possibilities of our language, which means that his own work did not exhaust what could be done with those discoveries. One of the pleasures, therefore, of *Visiting Wallace* is finding in other poets' poems Stevens' poems, a sort of poetic *Where's Waldo?* In this sense, any reader's interest in a given poem is likely to depend upon a recognition of the source material. If "Of Modern Poetry" has not staked out a place in your mind, Hirsch's "twanging" might just seem odd, even off-putting. Consequently, I am sure I missed a lot here, and some of these poems might come into a greater life if, for example, I would just reread all of "The Comedian as the Letter C."

No review of any anthology, even one as generous as *Visiting Wallace*, can be complete without the reviewer's pointing out some terrible omission. Admittedly, this is a kind of self-congratulatory moment on the reviewer's part, designed to say, "Look what I know!" and "How could you not have had the good sense to do what I would have done?" But I will risk being know-it-all to lament the absence of Donald Justice's "Homage to the Memory of Wallace Stevens."

Justice's lovely "After a Phrase Abandoned by Wallace Stevens" is included. Here the epigraph, "The alp at the end of the street," a line from Stevens' notebooks, generates a poem indebted to Stevens, but one which wholly belongs to Justice. Nevertheless, Justice's "Homage" should have been chosen instead. (The editors include only one poem by each poet, a regrettable stric-

ture in this case.) Here are the first two stanzas of "Homage to the Memory of Wallace Stevens":

Hartford is cold today but no colder for your absence.
The rain is green over Avon and, since your death, the sky
Has been blue many times with a blue you did not imagine.

The judges of Key West sit soberly in black
But only because it is their accustomed garb,
And the sea sings with the same voice still, neither serious
nor sorry. (*Collected Poems* [Knopf, 2004] 162)

"Homage to the Memory of Wallace Stevens" manages to use Stevens without being dominated by him, and could serve as a model of the poem of appropriation. It is as if Stevens stands behind this poem as a kind of ghost, lured back into being by the discovery of a shared truth. Nor can I leave the poem without noting how delicately in the final line of his second section—"Who borrows your French words and postures now?"—Justice has hidden the last line of "Lycidas"—"Tomorrow to fresh woods and pastures new." Behind the ghost of Stevens stands the ghost of Milton. One loss contains and reflects another. The words of mourning are changed, but shared. Had "Homage to the Memory of Wallace Stevens" been included in the anthology, it would have been the most beautiful and consequential of all the poems.

I am sorry also that the book does not contain either "Inventing Wallace Stevens" or "The House Was Quiet," by Stephen Dunn. I would have liked them both, since they represent two distinctly different ways of "visiting" Stevens. "Inventing Wallace Stevens" is, as its title suggests, a comic poem of assemblage, but it is also a touching evocation of the distance between ordinary reality and the reality of the imagination. In contrast, "The House Was Quiet" borrows the structure of Stevens' "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm" to contain a scene of painful disquiet. In Stevens, the consoling stability of the world leaves the reader content with "no other meaning" than the words of the book. In Dunn, "it was terrible how quiet it was. / And, sensing an advantage, the world pressed in" (*The Insistence of Beauty* [Norton, 2004] 29). That terror depends upon the lost solace of Stevens' vision.

But we must be grateful—setting aside these quarrels—for a book that has gathered such a wide range of poets. There are well-known poets here with well-known poems—Robert Lowell, John Ashbery, Theodore Roethke—important poets with lesser-known poems—Adrienne Rich, William Carlos Williams, Robert Creeley, James Merrill—and lesser-known poets with lively and engaging poems—Mike Perrow, Kurt Brown, Tony Quagliano, and Clare Rossini, among others. It's good to have been invited to visit them all.

"Reality is not what it is," Stevens writes in "Adagia." "It consists of the many realities which it can be made into" (*CPP* 914). Like the making of a poem, "reality" reveals itself as it changes into something else. So the best poems in *Visiting Wallace* move between their own realities and those that now seem to belong to Stevens. And sometimes, as with *twanging*, the word *real-*

ity itself seems his. "The world of the poet," Stevens writes, "depends on the world that he has contemplated" (CPP 913). So the worlds that poets now may contemplate must include the world that Wallace Stevens saw, and showed us how to see.

Lawrence Raab
Williams College

Queering Cold War Poetry: Ethics of Vulnerability in Cuba and the United States.

By Eric Keenaghan. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2009.

Wallace Stevens is one of four poets taken up in Eric Keenaghan's *Queering Cold War Poetry: Ethics of Vulnerability in Cuba and the United States*, right alongside fellow American Robert Duncan and the Cuban writers José Lezama Lima and Severo Sarduy. Nonetheless, this book is mostly a polemic weighted significantly on the side of cutting edge queer theory and current cultural studies discourse. Readers new to Stevens may find this timely mix somewhat bracing. Longtime readers, however, especially longtime readers of Stevens criticism, may become a bit impatient. Either way, it is still a small section of the Stevens canon that is represented in Keenaghan's study, and mostly in its first chapter, entitled "Intrinsic Coupling: Wallace Stevens and the Pleasures of Correspondence." The three poems viewed in detail there—"A Word with José Rodríguez Feo" (1945), "Paisant Chronicle" (1945), and "Attempt to Discover Life" (1946)—were all written for the gay poet and translator José Rodríguez Feo, with whom Stevens had struck up an intense friendship and correspondence while Feo was a student at Harvard during WWII. As such, these poems form a thematic bridge to the book's second chapter, "A Nation's Secrets: Resistance and Reform in José Lezama Lima's Poetic System," since both Rodríguez Feo (returning to Cuba in 1943) and Lezama Lima were co-editors of the vanguardist magazine *Orígenes*, and were also devoted readers and sometime publishers of Stevens' work. With the third chapter focused on the work of Duncan, "Vulnerable Households: Containment and Robert Duncan's Queered Nation," only an endnote retains a tenuous link to Stevens, asserting that "[Duncan's] critical prose does not focus on Stevens, though [Duncan] did regard him as one of his 'masters' " (160 n23). By the fourth chapter, "A Baroque Revolution: Severo Sarduy's Queer Cosmology," Stevens would appear to have disappeared entirely from the discussion of texts mostly translated from their original Spanish by the author himself. So why Stevens at all?

To understand Stevens' important place to the political temper of the time—America through the war years and those of the 1950s Cold War "containment" culture following—especially Stevens' significance to queer studies today, we first need to fathom the poet's "ethics of vulnerability" in the book's subtitle. For the most part, this ethic is gleaned mostly from the three aforementioned poems, although Stevens would publish four others in *Orígenes* in 1944 inexplicably not dealt with here. Their ethic of vulnerability, ac-

ording to the author, translates into a strategy of resistance to the tradition of liberal humanism prevalent in the democratic culture of Stevens' day and very much alive in our own. More precisely, while "liberalism," on the one hand, has been historically all about protecting the rights of private citizens and safeguarding their security within home, community, and nation against untold threat from the outside—the threat posed by Communism to post-War American democracy through the 1950s and 1960s, say—"vulnerability," on the other hand, bespeaks a more interpersonal ethic whereby "one lets one's guard down, as in coalitional politics [since] it is an ontological—yet historically variable—condition of being open to others" (7).

Hence, the "intrinsic coupling" of a heterosexual sage in the democratic North generously mentoring a homosexual poet-ephebe from a socialist country to the South is perhaps the model of vulnerability *par excellence*, especially given the Cold War's claustrophobic paranoia looming globally as the backdrop to the fervent exchanges between Stevens and Rodríguez Feo that would continue almost to the end of Stevens' life in 1955 (and published separately much later in *Secretaries of the Moon* [1986]). The "queering" of Stevens' so-called "Cold War" poetry—a somewhat anachronistic phrase given its wartime publication—in the one chapter devoted to this work, therefore, is not intended to "out" the poet. As a queer theorist, Keenaghan aims only to assess "the possibilities of vulnerability" as a critical tool. By reading Stevens alongside the three other related writers, Keenaghan believes their work today "can school contemporary queer theory in the joys of rediscovering commonality, of learning what it means to live metaphorically, so that we might move beyond liberalism's constraints and exclusions" (30).

"To live metaphorically," of course, would almost programmatically require that Keenaghan turn his attention to the genre of poetry itself in order to model the vulnerability so prized by the queer theorist schooled in the "anti-humanism" of Louis Althusser yesterday (116), and the "anti-sovereignty" of Giorgio Agamben today (12). For poetry, he states, and lyric poetry most especially, "sets itself apart from other discursive modes through its renunciation of modernity's rationality and its [presumably, poetry's] consequential blurring of the lines between public and private" (26). More precisely, lyric poetry "lets differences discrepantly point to those similarities connecting us to others" (26). In the "Intrinsic Coupling" chapter on Stevens, this identity-in-difference dynamic accordingly becomes "a perfect vehicle for such liberation since in its foregrounding of a metamorphically metamorphic [*sic*] language it actually encourages readers to look beyond familiar and legible forms of community" (38). "In this way," Keenaghan concludes, "poetic resemblance spurs one to recognize hitherto invisible communities. It generates a productive and ethical crisis disruptive of dear liberal precepts" (38).

Just at this point, the three poems expressly written for Rodríguez Feo noted above are introduced into the analysis, and there would appear to be no doubt in anyone's mind that Stevens is a man on a mission, though "at the very end of his life" (57) may not be entirely accurate. As a brief side-bar on the later "Someone Puts a Pineapple Together" (1947) reveals, "the poet's duty is politicized *and* salvific," and "[His] account of resemblance is the pleasur-

able medium for his messianic mission of saving the rest of us from liberalism, egoism, and nationalism" (50). Yet if it is lyric poetry itself that carries much of the political burden to transmit that salvific account of resemblance to Stevens' readers, Keenaghan perhaps shares a significant critical alignment with Mutlu Blasing's recent *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and Pleasure of Words* (2007), and the assertion there that "The lyric 'I' makes the communal personality of people audible" (12). But regular readers of these pages may recall Joseph Duemer's cautionary response to such a stance by reminding us that "At least since William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* in the late eighteenth century, the lyric poem in English has been characterized not so much by unity as by a barely contained centripetal force constantly threatening to tear the lyric to pieces." Continues Duemer: "The lyrics of Wallace Stevens habitually withdraw what they have revealed and those of John Ashbery [arguably as devoted a gay reader of Stevens as Rodríguez Feo] introduce so many shifts of grammatical reference as to undermine any sort of epistemological or ontological certainty" (209).

Part of the problem, then, with blanket assertions about the resembling metaphoricity of lyric poetry lies with the overdetermined assertion that all nonnarrative poems presenting a single speaker giving free voice feelingly to one thought process or another, in the conventional sense of the term "lyric," are necessarily open and *a fortiori* liberatory forms of expression. What difference would it make, for instance, for (or against) an argument for "liberal humanism" if the Cold War poet chooses to write in the more structured and arguably closed-form classes of lyric such as the sonnet or the elegy or the ode? In Stevens' own case in particular, the problem is additionally compounded by the fact that the "metaphorically metaphoric" lyricism ascribed to Stevens in his queer mission to sanctify a differentiating commonality rather than an identifying community may not have been metaphoric at all. As Jacqueline Brogan powerfully made the case years ago in *Stevens and Simile: A Theory of Language* (1986), when it was perhaps still not unfashionable to write painstaking formalist criticism about a single author, it was the simile (in the spirit of Hans Vaihinger's *The Philosophy of "As If"* [1924]) that was more likely Stevens' lyrical rhetoric of choice. In search of the ideal model that might prove "particularly useful for understanding the paradoxical nature of language in Stevens' poetry," Brogan would conclude: "Invoking the gap that is both the point of fragmentation and the point of union, the simile combines both tendencies of language we have discussed [in Stevens] and consequently provides the best model for understanding the form and action of [his] poetic language as it attempts to expose itself" (125).

Be that as it may, the chief gap that Keenaghan himself is mostly mindful of in this study is the one between the overly abstract lucubrations of queer theory and the overly liberalist tenets of queer studies. If the "intrinsic coupling" of writer and reader is the most prized of all as in the final chapter, where "Sarduy and his reader reciprocally penetrate each other, 'entering' one another 'greased' as if engaging in anal sex . . . [and] signal[ing] the coming of a new world" as it were (142)—well, "the impossible bugger" would have

been worth it after all because queer “ontology meets sociohistorical realism” (117) at last.

Bridging the gap between Stevens and Sarduy in this way, Keenaghan thus brings us full circle to the credo announced in his polemical “Introduction”: “I believe that we can learn much about the past political histories and the future possibilities of vulnerability if we explore poetry, that literary discourse veritably shunned by much queer theory and queer studies” (26). The assertion, no doubt, would come as a surprise to queer theorists Judith Butler and Lee Edelman, both enthusiastically embraced throughout the monograph (7, 12, 18–19, and *passim*), yet who have also written fine essays on a much larger view of the Stevens corpus that are curiously overlooked by the author. But maybe not so. For Butler, Stevens’ “The Man with the Blue Guitar” (1937) is all about “dissolv[ing] the ontological illusion” (*Theorizing American Literature: Hegel, the Sign and History*, ed. B. Cowan and J. Kronick [1991] 286); and for Edelman, Stevens’ “Life on a Battleship” (1939) is all about “the rehabilitation of the phallus . . . in a place of privilege and respect” (*Engendering Men: The Question of Male Feminist Criticism*, ed. J. Boone and M. Cadden [1990] 50). In its daring and ambition, *Queering Cold War Poetry* certainly helps to narrow the gap in the reception of Stevens from a gay readership perspective to be sure. Still, it does leave itself vulnerable to some important exceptioning that its proselytizing argumentation perhaps initially may not have intended.

David Jarraway
University of Ottawa

Listening on All Sides: Toward an Emersonian Ethics of Reading.

By Richard Deming. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007.

Although he chose not to identify it, the source for Richard Deming’s title phrase, “Listening on All Sides,” comes from a later paragraph in the essay “Experience,” in which Emerson depicts a “sympathetic” swimmer surrounded by drowning men who “all catch at him” dangerously (*Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays & Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte [N.Y.: Library of America, 1983] 490). Although Emerson portends mortal risk for this feeling person who attempts to listen “on all sides,” Deming inverts Emerson’s message for his purposes, making listening a saving function for the concept he defines as an “Emersonian ethics of reading.”

The bare bones of Deming’s complex theory may be summarized this way: language bewitches and confuses; Emerson and key writers who follow him develop toward language a posture of skepticism against ever achieving ultimate meaning or clarity; this skeptical stance fosters a dynamic context for a value-based interaction involving author, text, and reader; the interaction involves creative negotiation in encounters that are generative, not stifling; since they improve self-knowledge and contribute to a coherent community, these engagements are, in their essence, ethical acts. Listening lies at the heart of the process. “To speak is to listen to a deep grammar in order to be listened to, rather than heard,” writes Deming. “Hearing something implies a kind of

passivity. Listening is an action that includes seeking a context for, making a meaning of, what one is listening to" (113). Absent universal contexts or absolute meaning, the terms we use as part of our investment in community "must be approached *from every side* and at every point by a multiplicity of voices and perspectives" (29; emphasis added).

For Deming, Emerson is just such a listener. Though he predates the aesthetic and psychological crises before the First World War, Emerson epitomizes a modernist whose approach to prose serves as a means to avoid rigidities, stale conventions, and brittle concepts in order to engage, instead, a middle ground within a "'stupendous antagonism'" (40). Deming intends to examine in this light not only Emerson, but also those "certain writers who participate in a phenomenological performativity inaugurated by Emerson" (40). He divides his study into four chapters, with Emerson's writings and theory threading heavily through all of them. The first discusses reading and ethics, and establishes the foundations of the argument. The second considers Emerson's ethics-based poetics, particularly as expressed in the pivotal essays "Circles," "Fate," and "Experience." Chapter three elaborates how Emerson's special version of modernism is revealed in two renowned contemporaries, Hawthorne and Melville. Deming's interest here is to examine Melville's essay "Hawthorne and His Mosses," especially Melville's recreation of self as fictive author and how that recreation relates to the ethical dimension Deming describes. Finally, the lengthy fourth chapter considers "the interrelated efforts" of Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams, whose poetics are "enactments of alternative democratic processes" (7). Deming gives primary attention to Stevens' aphorisms, to "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," and, especially, to the short poem "The American Sublime." For Williams, who is noted as bringing attention "to the primary fact of language as a social medium" (137), he discusses *Paterson* and a few shorter poems, and also provides important comparisons between Williams' poetics and the theories of John Dewey.

Deming opens his second chapter with uncharacteristic simplicity: "To write about the ethics of reading is no small thing, and it is difficult even to say where such ethics might be positioned" (41). For the reader who has slithered through the complexities of chapter one, this plainness is a welcome, if momentary, analgesic. The lineage that Deming's argument traces, and a good reason for its elaboration being "no small thing," is indeed impressive. His discussion, as it crisscrosses paths of philosophy, literature, and literary theory, comprises a who's who gallery of prominent figures from European and American philosophy and literary theory: Stanley Cavell, J. L. Austin, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, J. Hillis Miller, Harold Bloom, Richard Rorty, and Richard Poirier, to name a few. Deming's distinct talent throughout is to incorporate with economy and insight these various and complex perspectives into his analysis. He avoids a temptation to elaborate unnecessarily, or to get lost in the examples, with the result that sometimes his taut paragraphs are so crafted as to require a deliberate unraveling. A poet himself, Deming clearly enjoys clever vocabulary and wordplay. In minor yet noticeable instances, Deming's prose distracts or exasperates, as

when a sentence referring to “language we use every day” ends with the dizzying opposite, “a concatenation of rhizomatic subjectivities” (35).

The jacket blurb for *Listening on All Sides* contends that “this book challenges current trends in American literary studies and advances the newly developing field of ordinary language criticism.” Principal among the trends Deming debunks is that sponsored by Bloom who—having raised Emerson’s importance to the status of visionary—has, in fact, reduced his cultural significance. Bloom’s interest in literary figures (“from John Milton to John Ashbury”) is for their “virtuosity” (63). Yet, when Emerson becomes a “virtuoso” against whom others must measure their anxieties of influence, Emerson becomes “useful” (63) (the echo to pragmatism is relevant) to no one other than poets and literary critics. “Claims that he was visionary and prophetic,” Deming argues, “come at the cost of repressing Emerson’s textuality, pulling Emerson from the ebb and flow of culture, making him rarefied and otherworldly” (64). Recasting Emerson as one who successfully negotiates dichotomies (fate vs. freedom, self vs. other, etc.) provides Deming a platform for defending Emerson from several of the harshest attacks against him—as an evader of modern philosophy (Cornel West), as lacking vigor (Stephen Whicher), as reluctant to argue definitively (Lawrence Buell), as utopian thinker (various). Repositioning Emerson against attacks that have become trite by their repetition and, sometimes, their arrogance, is a distinct accomplishment of this study.

By the time Deming comes to an analysis of Stevens and Williams, the terminology of the discussion is almost too familiar. Although Deming identifies both poets as exemplifying “different but interconnected strains” of Emersonian modernism (108), the chapter separates into separate pillars of analysis. Even connecting links are expressed tentatively: “Williams, not unlike his friend and rival Wallace Stevens, sought to revive language” (141). The continuity from Emerson to William James to Stevens and Williams is strongest in Deming’s consideration of pragmatism. “[A]rguably America’s greatest contribution to philosophy” (132), pragmatism applies to the approaches of all three writers, especially in their approaches to truth, practicality, and the “investment in the ordinary” (136). Deming postulates that the elements of pragmatism many critics notice in Emerson are often the very elements that make him modernist. He notices that Williams and John Dewey share a “Jamesian tough-mindedness” (139), jokes when Stevens’ “Jamesian roots are showing” (132), and quips that, for both Stevens and William James, “ideas are kinds of performances that strut and fret their hour upon a revolving conceptual stage” (133).

When Stevens writes in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” that “The poem refreshes life so that we share, / For a moment, the first idea” (*Collected Poetry and Prose* 330), Deming underscores Stevens’ use of “we” as an “insistence” that indicates Stevens’ deliberate link to community. Yet, although this so-called insistence fits nicely Deming’s ethics of reading formula, one wonders what other pronoun Stevens might have used. In an interesting discussion of Stevens’ aphoristic deliberations on God, fiction, and redemption, Deming concludes that Stevens provides a means for deliberating structures of belief “not just in terms of one’s own subjectivity but in terms of larger cultural formations,” yet these formations are not specified and need to be. The bulk of Deming’s atten-

tion to Stevens in this chapter comes in an extended, provocative analysis of "The American Sublime," the poem in which an ironic speaker, confronting an iconic statue of General Jackson, ruminates on the proper responses to sublimity within a democratic landscape. Deming provides excellent glosses to the poem's images. He acknowledges the speakers' "keen self-consciousness" in a work that is "as funny, as self-mocking as Stevens can on occasion be" (127). Yet, finally, as in the examples above, Deming too much squeezes the poem to fit his theme. He compromises the speaker's satiric tone and converts the poem's rhetorical question ("But how does one feel?" [CPP 107]) into a literal question, which he then answers by examining possibilities for Jackson's actual feelings about sublimity when he posed for the statue. Although Deming has the right to develop such a reading, it would help if he explained the apparent contradiction to Stevens' extended commentary on the Jackson statue in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words." Stevens' derogatory reference to the statue as purely "a work of fancy" that is "neither of the imagination nor of reality" (CPP 648) removes considerable latitude for "negotiating" the poem's ironies into a cultural modulation that fits Deming's premises.

Overall, the focus of Deming's study is refined and often brilliant, most especially in the freshness it brings to the poetics of Emerson.

David La Guardia
John Carroll University

News and Comments

The dedication of the Wallace Stevens Walk took place on June 11, 2009, in Hartford sponsored by the Hartford Friends and Enemies of Wallace Stevens (HFEWS). Each of thirteen granite markers is etched with a stanza from WS' poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." Glen MacLeod reports that nearly 200 people attended, far more than expected. Governor M. Jodi Rell sent an official proclamation, declaring the day "Wallace Stevens Walk Day in Connecticut." As part of the festivities, thirteen black balloons were released, each carrying one stanza of the poem.



Left to right: James Finnegan, current president of the HFEWS; John Orofino, architect who designed the markers; Christine Palm, immediate past president of HFEWS; and Michael Gannon, community relations officer for The Hartford Financial Services Group. Photo by Andy Hart, *Hartford News*.

* * *

Annette Gordon-Reed has been appointed as the Wallace Stevens Professor at Law for New York Law School, according to the May announcement by Dean Richard A. Matasar. WS graduate from the school in 1903. Professor Gordon-Reed, like Stevens, has achieved considerable distinction in literature while pursuing a successful career in the law. She shares with him the honor of receiving both a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award. She received both awards for *The Hemmingeses of Monticello: An American Family*.

* * *

The Rose Garden poetry reading, part of the Rose Festival Weekend at Elizabeth Park, took place on June 20, 2009, sponsored by the Friends and Enemies of Wallace Stevens. Two Connecticut-based poets participated. Nancy Kuhl's first full-length poetry collection, *The Wife of the Left Hand*, was published in 2007 by Shearsman Books, and her second volume, *Suspend*, is forthcoming in 2010. She is co-editor of Phylum Press, a small poetry publisher, and curator of poetry of the Yale Collection of American Literature at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Brian Johnson is the author of *Torch Lake and Other Poems* and a finalist for the Norma Farber First Book Award. He has also received an Academy of American Poets Prize, a Connecticut Commission on the Arts Fellowship, and two Pushcart Prize nominations. He teaches at Southern Connecticut State University.

* * *

For the 14th Annual Wallace Stevens Birthday Bash, to be held on Saturday, November 7th, the featured speaker will be Marjorie Perloff. Her lecture is entitled "Revisiting the Adagia: The Role of Aphorism in Wallace Stevens' Poetry."

* * *

The 2008 WS Scholarship was awarded to John Harrity of the Watkinson School. The \$1,000 prize goes each year to a Hartford high school student who shows exemplary ability as a poet.

* * *

Elliot's Books seeks an individual or institution, such as a library or museum, to purchase Wallace Stevens' Art Collection, consisting of twenty-eight paintings, etchings, and lithographs, including the Tal Coat still life that Stevens entitled "Angels Surrounded by Paysans." Also included are Stevens' furnishings: his bed, armoire, writing desk and chair, secretary, two easy chairs, humidior, walking cane, pocket watch, bathroom scale, lamps, many with oriental motifs, dozens of photographs (including the one with Robert Frost at Key West), his confirmation and marriage certificates, his medal from the Poetry Society of America, and rare genealogical material. For more information, contact Elliot Ephraim at 203-484-2184 or outofprintbooks1@mindspring.com.

* * *

The past twelve months have been an exceptionally robust time for the sale of WS rare books and manuscripts, apparent in these highlights. Bookseller William Reese of New Haven issued Catalogue 262 in October, 2008, offering an impressive 32 rare editions of his works. Notable items were a first edition, third binding of *Harmonium*, and a first edition of *Ideas of Order*, one of 135 numbered copies, signed by Stevens. James Cummins listed four rare titles and a signed note in a 2008 catalog. A first edition, second binding, of *Harmonium* with an autograph inscription, was offered for \$15,000, while a brief

typewritten note to Allen Tate appeared at \$5,000. The winter 2009 catalog of James S. Jaffe Rare Books of New York City lists eight rare works, including a first edition of *Esthétique du Mal*, one of 300 copies printed on Pace paper, and one of only a few copies in rose Natsume straw-paper-covered boards, offered for \$10,000. In May, bookseller Jett W. Whitehead listed four WS rare titles, among them a first edition of *The Auroras of Autumn*, priced at \$1,300.

Sara S. Hodson
The Huntington Library

**Wallace Stevens Panel
MLA 2009
Philadelphia**

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Monday, December 28, 2009
7:15-8:30 p.m., Philadelphia Marriott

Program arranged by the Wallace Stevens Society
Presiding: Glen MacLeod, Univ. of Connecticut, Waterbury

1. "Wallace Stevens, Henry James, and the Contours of Difficult Thought," Carolyn Masel, Australian Catholic Univ., Melbourne
2. "The American Seen: Stevens and James Walk New Haven," Charles Stewart Berger, Southern Illinois Univ., Edwardsville
3. "'Ah! Yes, Desire . . .': Tensions between Hypotaxis and Parataxis in James and Stevens," Gert Buelens, Ghent Univ.; Bart P. Eeckhout, Univ. of Antwerp



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March 4–6, 2010

New York University's Gallatin School will host a conference, co-sponsored by the Poetry Society of America, on March 4, 5, and 6, 2010, on the poetry of Wallace Stevens. Presentations will consider Stevens' early work in New York in relation to the temper of the times, but also how his continuous relationship to the city might have helped to shape his later poetry. Speakers include some of Stevens' most distinguished readers—scholars and poets alike. For information about attending contact:

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