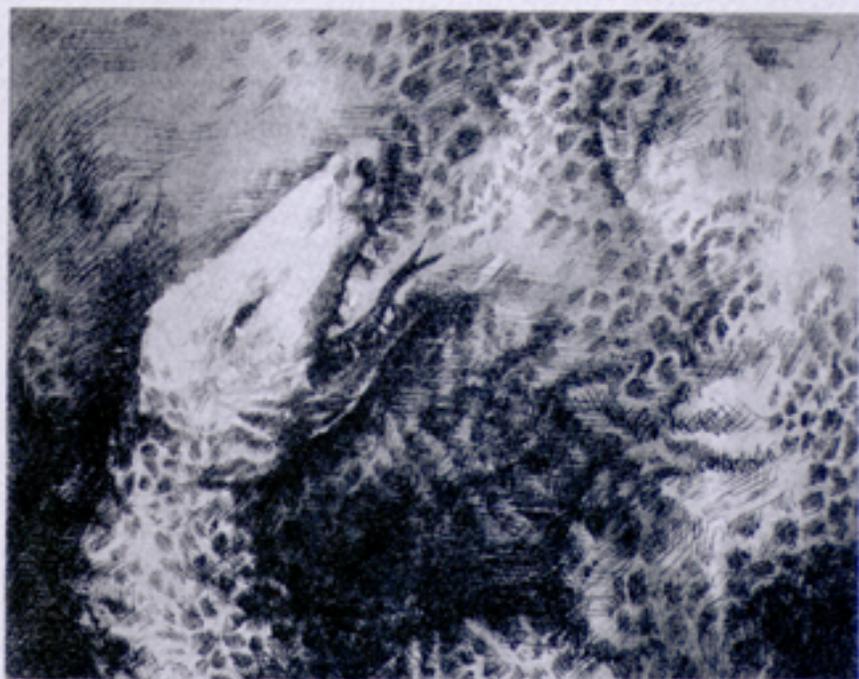


*The
Wallace
Stevens
Journal*



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Fall 1980

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GUEST EDITOR

GEORGE S. LENSING

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL

Wallace Stevens and Stevens T. Mason:

An Epistolary Exchange on Poetic Meaning—*George S. Lensing . . . 34*

Insurance and Social Change—*Wallace Stevens . . . 37*

Two Notes on Stevens—*Denis Donoghue . . . 40*

The Deceptions of Wallace Stevens—*Eleanor Cook . . . 46*

The Figure of the Virile Poet as Youth:

"Carnet de Voyage" and Stevens' Journals—*Wallace Martin . . . 58*

Reviews . . . 68

Current Bibliography—*John N. Serio . . . 72*

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Wallace Stevens and Stevens T. Mason: An Epistolary Exchange on Poetic Meaning

GEORGE S. LENSING

Stevens T. Mason was a business associate and friend of Wallace Stevens. He was a partner in Mason, Davidson & Mansfield, a law firm in Detroit in the 1930's. His daughter, Helen M. Ellerby, describes the friendship: "Stevens T. Mason was my father and he died in 1950 My father represented the Hartford Accident Company and originally met Mr. Stevens through their business connection. They became friends and exchanged many letters and also met in person. I wish I had more of the letters, but I am afraid they have been lost. One in particular I remember was a letter my father sent Mr. Stevens enclosing a poem that had been published in the Hartford Accident's news letter. It was not written by Mr. Stevens and my father thought it was pretty stupid so he pasted it on a sheet of his stationery and wrote across the bottom "Is the man who wrote this still alive?" In return he got a poem written to him by Mr. Stevens and I think it is a funny one. 'If Stevens T. Mason wants to keep all his face on/
And not have his features torn out/
Then Stevens T. Mason should be more self-effacin/
And not such a critical lout.'" The review in the *New York Times* to which Mason refers was written by Eda Lou Walton. Entitled "Wallace Stevens," it appeared on December 6, 1936, and reviews *Ideas of Order and Owl's Clover*. (The statue, whose "full import" eluded Mason, appears in the latter.) *Sense and Poetry, Essays on the Place of Meaning in Contemporary Verse*, by John Sparrow (London: Constable and Co. Ltd., 1934), is the text Stevens recommends to Mason. The book appeared in the United States published by Yale University Press in the same year. Finally, the recent lecture mentioned by Stevens is "The Irrational Element in Poetry," (*Opus Posthumous*, 216-29), delivered at Harvard under the sponsorship of the Morris Gray Committee. The two letters, reproduced here in their entirety, are in the possession of the Huntington Library, Art Gallery and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, Ca. For permission to reproduce them here, I am grateful to the Huntington Library and Miss Holly Stevens.

December 8th. 1936

Mr. Wallace Stevens
Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company
Hartford Connecticut

My dear Mr. Stevens: -

I was delighted with the article in the New York Times Book Review.

The only trouble is that I don't understand why I couldn't get the idea of "Owl's Clover" the way it is explained in the article, which I presume is the correct explanation of it.

I read "Owl's Clover" and Mrs. Mason read it and we both enjoyed it, but we enjoyed it as a piece of music or a lovely picture, but neither of us ever appreciated the full import of the statue until we read the article in The Times. Why is that? We are supposed to be educated people, and yet it is just as if we were color blind.

Do people generally understand the real meaning of "Owl's Clover" without having it explained to them. [sic] If they do I suppose I am just hopelessly dumb. If they do not I think you ought to explain it in the book.

Of course, I know that shocks you terribly. Perhaps it would detract from the duty of the thing as a whole just as it would detract from a work of art to have the artist write the explanation on the bottom. That would even shock me.

However I should like to see some way out.

With kind regards and best wishes, I am

Yours truly,

Stevens T. Mason

* * *

Personal

December 10, 1936

Dear Mr. Mason:

Thanks for your letter.

It is not possible to produce the music and imagery of poetry (at least, it is not possible for me), and at the same time to define the underlying idea with the clarity of a piece of chalk defining things on a blackboard. There are certain subjects, themselves musical and indefinite, of which this is not true. Unfortunately, however, those are not permissible subjects now-a-days: I don't mean to say permissible in the sense of permissible from the point of view of convention; I mean that we are just not interested in such subjects. Everything is overwhelmingly real now-a-days; and accordingly we are interested in reality. From the point of view of poetry, we are interested in sensuous reality. You can't make a perfectly plain fact sensuous and still retain its plainness.

I lectured on this very subject at Harvard on Tuesday afternoon and could give you an earful. You will, however, find a great deal on the subject of sense: meaning, in poetry, in a book that came out a year or two ago, by John Sparrow, called, I believe, POETRY and SENSE. It was published in England. If you are interested enough to procure a copy of that, it will make a complete poetic reader out of you.

Not everything that Mrs. Walton said in her article in the New York Times was true. How could it be, since she had only the book itself to go by, and since, as I have just said, one's real subject in such a book is not the nominal subject but the poetic subject. Nevertheless, she had the general idea and a good many of the details. Some one said not long ago that a poem consists of all the constructions that can be placed upon it. Its measure is the variety of constructions that can be placed upon it: the variety of meanings that can be found in it. There is only one possible meaning in two times two makes four.

Sorry that I don't get to Detroit more often. It looks as though we could have a very interesting argument.

Very truly yours,

Wallace Stevens

To

Mr. Stevens T. Mason
MASON DAVIDSON & MANSFIELD
2034 National Bank Bldg.
Detroit, Michigan

Insurance and Social Change¹

WALLACE STEVENS

If each of us could put his hand on money whenever money was necessary: to repair any damage, to meet any emergency, we should all be willing to stop so far as money goes. To be certain of a regular income, as in the case of social security, is not the same thing as to be able to repair any damage, or to meet any emergency. Obviously, in a world in which insurance had become perfect, the case of social security would be a minor case. In short, universal insurance or insurance for all is not the same thing as ubiquitous insurance or insurance for everything.

The significance of a business is not wholly an affair of its statistics. This note is written lightly and is intended to touch the imagination, because that seems to be the best way to come quickly to the point. The objective of all of us is to live in a world in which nothing unpleasant can happen. Our prime instinct is to go on indefinitely like the wax flowers on the mantelpiece. Insurance is the most easily understood geometry for calculating how to bring the thing about.

The truth is that we may well be entering an insurance era. Compare the man who, as an individual, insures his dwelling against fire with that personality of the first plane who, at a stroke, insures all dwellings against fire; and who, without stopping to think about it, insures not only the lives of all those that live in the dwellings, but insures all people against all happenings of everyday life, even the worm in the apple or the piano out of tune. These are instances of insurance as it exists; and if they were not, there would be Lloyds or the future. There is no difference between the worm in the apple and the tack in the can of sardines, and not the slightest difference between the piano out of tune and a person disabled.

It helps us to see the actual world to visualize a fantastic world. Thus, when Mr. Wells creates a world of machines, a matter-of-fact truth about the world in which we live becomes clear for all the fiction. When he passes from the international to the interstellar, we hug the purely local. In the same way it helps us to see insurance in the midst of social change to imagine a world in which insurance had been made perfect. In such a world we should be certain of an income. Out of the income we should be able, by the payment of a trivial premium, to protect ourselves, our families and our property against everything. The procedure would necessarily be simple: Probably the dropping of a penny each morning in a box at the corner nearest one's place of residence on the way to one's place of employment. Each of us would have a personal or peculiar penny. What is the difference between a personal penny and a social security number? The circle just stated: income, insurance, the thing that happens and income again, would widen and soon become income, insurance, the thing that fails to happen and income again. In other words, not only would all our losses be made good, but all our wishes would come true.

If Mr. Wells has preferred the machine to insurance as his field, he has only left insurance to others. How far have others gone? The Italians have a quasi-governmental insurance organization, known as the National Insurance Institute, which came into being as the result of a national law passed in 1912. A consular report says . . .

The law was passed in pursuance of a proposal of a state monopoly of life insurance made the same year by Premier Giolitti. The avowed purposes of this proposal were to make monopoly profits available for social welfare expenditure and to enable the employment of state guarantees to stimulate increase of life insurance in Italy.

This does not mean, however, that private companies have been required to cease operations. In 1923 the Fascist government issued a decree permitting private companies to operate under conditions; and the fact is that private companies, both domestic and foreign, are in operation at the present time, although it is said that they operate under severe competitive handicaps. It is not surprising to hear it reported that approximately half of the life insurance in the Kingdom is in the Institute. Private companies must cede or reinsure substantial parts of their business to the Institute. Note, too, that in Italy postal officials are among those that sell life insurance.

Liability insurance, or civil responsibility business, as they call it, is not so attractive a subject for the monopolistically-minded politician, and this field remains in Italy a field for private enterprise. There is little to be said about fire insurance in Italy, where virtually all buildings are constructed chiefly of non-combustible materials. The government has a monopoly of obligatory social insurance (Cassa Nazionale per le Assicurazioni Sociali, of Rome). Social insurance relates to disability, tuberculosis, old age and unemployment. The funds of Cassa Nazionale are invested largely in public works.

In Germany private companies survive, but under a supervision described as "a continuous supervision of the whole business management whereby the Supervision Board may to a great extent act at its own decision". There are compulsory standard rules relating, for example, even to bookkeeping. As the field of insurance expands, and as the interest of the government in it becomes intensified to a point approaching identity, supervision justifiably becomes increasingly more severe. If this would be true in normal circumstances, it is all the more true in a period in which exhaustion has been an aggressive force.

In England, a Parliamentary committee on obligatory insurance has only recently reported in favor of a licensing system in which the approval of companies will be vested in other companies which will contribute to a central fund. Losses from the insolvency of any company will be payable from the central fund. Third party losses, uncollectible because of the operation of conditions, will also be payable from the central fund.

In the vast monopoly of Communism, insurance is itself a monopoly. The organization, Gosstrakh, is a state department and, by government decree,

no other organization has the right to do an insurance business in the territory of the Soviets. This would put insurance agents on a footing with letter carriers or government employees generally, if it were not for the fact that, in Russia, everybody is on the same footing. Gosstrakh issues policies in several foreign companies which are its correspondents.

These very inadequate glimpses of the situation in those European countries where social pressure has been most acute and social and political change most marked indicate that, as the social mass seeks to maintain itself, it relies more and more on insurance and treats it as of such significance that the preservation of the insurers becomes a governmental function or a highly important object of governmental solicitude. Moreover, the government, in turn, avails itself of insurance not only in its social and political aspects but, in some directions, itself becomes an insurer and opens to its requirements the huge accumulation of funds from that source, which it applies, sometimes to social purposes, sometimes to general purposes, its own credit taking the place of reserves.

We shall never live in a world quite so mechanical as the one that Mr. Wells has imagined, nor in a world in which insurance has been made perfect, and where we can buy peace and prosperity as readily and as cheaply as we can buy the morning newspaper. All the same, we have advanced remarkably; and future advances seem to be not fantastic but certain. It is all a question of remaining solvent, a question of making a reasonable profit. Agents have as much at stake as any group in the making of a reasonable profit. Even if the point is considered from the view of the nationalization of the business, it is not to be supposed that any government can maintain an entire population indefinitely at a loss. If private companies can continue to expand with profit, no question of nationalization, except in regulatory and certain social aspects, is likely to arise under our system.

Under other systems, that is to say, under both Fascist and Communist systems, the finely-tailored agent, wearing a boutonniere, gives way to the letter carrier. In a late number of the Accident Company's Confidential Bulletin, it was said that . . .

Cemeteries have been found by a number of offices to be a very definite market for the Hartford's All Risk Securities Policy.

This observation would apply to the Hartford's policies generally under Communism and, to some extent, under Fascism. In short, then, the activities of the insurance business are likely, the greater and more significant they are, to make one reflect on the possibilities of nationalization, particularly in a period of unrest and the changes incident to unrest, a period so easily to be regarded as a period of transition. Yet the greater these activities are: that is to say, the more they are adapted to the changing needs of changing times (provided they are conducted at a profit) the more certain they are to endure on the existing basis. But this exacts of each of us all that each of us, in his own job, has to give.

1. Reproduced with permission of The Hartford, Hartford Plaza, Hartford, Connecticut 06115. The essay appeared originally in *Hartford Agent*, 29, No. 4 (October 1937), 49-50.

Two Notes on Stevens

DENIS DONOGHUE

There is a passage near the beginning of the fifth book of *The Prelude* where Wordsworth, going out of his way to seek disquietude, considers the possibility that the entire world of books may someday be destroyed. And he hovers upon the incongruity between the spiritual nature of the bards and sages who have written the books and the materially vulnerable form in which alone their visions may be found. He continues:

Oh! why hath not the mind
Some element to stamp her image on
In nature somewhat nearer to her own?
Why, gifted with such powers to send abroad
Her spirit, must it lodge in shrines so frail?

The question proposes a small instance of a predicament Wordsworth often felt in larger terms, a sense of living in what Stevens called 'an element of antagonisms,' a world hostile or indifferent to his desire. Wordsworth's poetry tries to show, or to convince himself, that the element is not necessarily alien, that a nuptial relation to the world is indeed possible. It is the aim of feeling, which he often called consciousness or mind, to excite our sense of being at home in the world. Wordsworth's desire for such satisfaction was a scandal to Blake, who resented the apparent equality of world and self, reality and imagination. Wordsworth wanted to keep the peace between two forces deemed equal and, ideally, equably related. Blake insisted that the privileged force is vision or imagination, and that the mere world, unredeemed by vision, is null. But while we hold Blake's intransigence in view, we still find it reasonable to say that the Romantic impulse is to find ourselves at home in the only world our observation can confirm. The Wordsworthian imagination has an interest in showing how the imagination may endorse this discovery. The impulse is as strong in Stevens as in Wordsworth.

Wordsworth's question about books and the spiritual character of their authors has been taken up by Georges Poulet in *La conscience critique*, where he maintains that we should distinguish between exterior and interior objects. Exterior objects are those which have not, or not yet, entered into complicity with our imagination or, what is much the same thing, been engaged by our desire. Interior objects are in one degree or another compliant to our desire. Poulet does not say, but it is the case, that the difference between exterior and interior objects does not consist in the objects as such, their composition or character, but in the absence or presence of our design upon them, the force of our desire. If we are indifferent to an object, it remains forever exterior, beyond the pale of our desire. In any case, exterior objects are those we choose to leave alone.

Poulet ascribes to them a desire to be left alone, but clearly the desire is in us rather than in them. It is because of our desire that an object is marked for a change in its constitution. Poulet says that interior objects want to be spiritualized, converted to our terms, which are spiritual by definition. A book, when you merely buy or borrow it, is an exterior object: when you start reading it, it becomes an interior object, it wants to be redeemed from its merely material condition and changed into images, ideas, words, rhythms, that is to say, into mental entities. Reading is the act by which the book is transformed from an exterior to an interior fate. The book, once read, becomes for the reader an interior object.

There are losses and gains. I shall refer only to the gains. The chief gain is in amenity, the book turns into a fiction, transparent to my desire: the importunity of my mind has been successful. Poulet has not remarked, but this too must be the case, that the passages we don't understand in a book remain exterior to us, they refused to be converted into my spiritual terms. Poulet assumes that my reading is completely successful, in the sense that every word in the book yields to my desire. In that happy case the impression I gain in reading is that "the interior universe constituted by language does not seem radically opposed to the *me* who thinks it." The mental forms which it contains "do not seem to be of a nature other than that of my mind." He continues:

Since everything has become part of my mind, thanks to the intervention of language, the opposition between the subject and its objects has been considerably attenuated: and therefore the greatest advantage of literature is that I am persuaded by it that I am freed from my usual sense of incompatibility between my consciousness and its objects.

Reading, according to Poulet's account of it, is an act within the terms of Romanticism; it converts objects to subjects, draws exterior objects out of themselves into complicity with my feeling, desire, imagination. The pleasure it gives is the pleasure of Romantic poetry, that of finding oneself at home in a world willing to minister to one's desire for such a thing.

Poulet does not say, what I would wish to remark, that the process of converting the book as exterior object into my interiority is furthered by the skill of translating the black marks on a white page into notations of a human voice, or voices, speaking. Nothing is more congenial to such a desire than the responsiveness of a voice to one's inner ear. Printed pages are exterior, in Poulet's sense; they become interior when the reader translates them into a different element, that of the ear: we fancy that someone is speaking, and we listen.

If Poulet's version of reading is even provisionally acceptable, it prompts me to say that Stevens's *Collected Poems*, the big book, is ardent in wishing to give up its exteriority and to become, for every reader, an interior object. It

seems to urge the reader to find his consciousness and Stevens's fictions blissfully compatible. The reason is that the reader is urged to do with Stevens's poems what the poems do, or try to do, with an otherwise notoriously exterior object, the given world that observation confirms. The poems try to spiritualise the world; the reader tries to spiritualise the big book. When you take up the book and read the first poems of *Harmonium*, you find your desire begins to be appeased, the incompatibility of your consciousness and the words is dissolved. Or you find this if you hand yourself over to the sway of Stevens's rhetoric, his fluent *mundo*. '

In the sense I am describing, Stevens's Romanticism is extreme. He wants the entire world to become for him an interior object, and he trusts his imagination to effect the conversion. But he is a poet of many moods, and he sways to his moods even more than he trusts his imagination. Sometimes the world seems good, beautiful, exotic, even without the intervention of the imagination; or he is content to assume that its seeming good, beautiful, exotic is proof that it has already been blessed by the imagination. These are the blazoned days he invokes near the beginning of *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, when the honey of earth seems spontaneously rich and sweet. But more often the world is boring to him until his imagination has somehow redeemed it, changed it, or—much the same thing—encouraged him to fancy that it has been changed. In such a mood, Stevens composes structures of words, sentences, ideas, and cadences congenial to the feelings that have provoked them: the composition appeases his desire. And no wonder, since the structures are functions of his desire just as much as functions of language. The constituents of Stevens's poetry are of course words, but they are inseparable from moods, needs, desires, and the deepest need is to feel that the world proposed by his imagination is responsive to his desire. Stevens's chief category is not knowledge but pleasure; it is pleasure that makes him appear now as a voluptuary and again as a rabbi. These are two moods, two desires appeased for the time being.

It is true, as Auden said, that poetry makes nothing happen, but it is also true, as Stevens believed, that poetry can make things appear to happen and that the appearances are fulfilments of one's desire. Poetry does this by providing the feeling for things, which is what they have lacked. If we live in an old chaos of the sun, we need to feel — at least from time to time and from mood to mood — that the old chaos has been changed into a new order of the earth and that it has further novelties ready to be revealed to our inventive minds. If we live, as Stevens says in *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, "in a place / That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves," we need to feel, with answering force, that the place is our own and indeed ourselves. We want to reduce the monster to ourselves.

A question is obvious, so obvious that it hardly needs to be asked. We say to Stevens, as to every Romantic poet: in what sense have you converted the exterior objects of the world into interior objects, mental entities? Is the conversion real or notional? Is it anything more than a play of desires, illusions, fancies? The question is blunt; but remember that Stevens allowed for it in numbering among his times and moods the unblazoned day

on which the will demands that what it thinks be true. Stevens's will rarely made such a demand: or it felt in advance that the demand was exorbitant or pathetic; in any case, that it could not be fulfilled. Normally, Stevens's need to believe could best be appeased by constructing a fiction congenial to the local desire. Stevens called such fictions objects of belief; 'to believe' is his verb. I have often been dismayed by it. Belief is not the right word for our feeling when it goes out to embrace a mental object it has created. We may celebrate the object, enjoy it, take pride and pleasure in it, but I don't understand what it means to say we believe in it. In truth, we believe in whatever it is we have not created. Or we don't believe at all. Stevens's true idiom is an idiom of pleasure: it bewilders me to find him resorting to an idiom of belief.

We feel we have the right to demand of a Romantic poem that it earn the transfiguration it claims to perform. When it claims to convert exterior objects into interior objects, we are troubled if we find the conversion facile or premature: we lose confidence in the integrity of the poet and think him a liar. Conversions are most convincing when they seem most difficult, perhaps a little imperfect; in these transactions, the imperfect is our paradise. *The Man with the Blue Guitar* is a case in point of our dismay: its conversions of exterior into interior objects seem facile, too buoyant to be convincing. Burdens lifted in that style had to be light, to begin with. So we are more deeply moved by Stevens in his later than in his earlier poems: in the later work, without losing confidence in his imagination, he admitted into the reckoning more of the world's weight and character, more of all the things that resist the imagination, remain sullen in its presence, the quotidian things slow to be transformed. In such poems as 'The Plain Sense of Things,' 'The Course of a Particular,' 'St. Armorer's Church from the Outside,' 'The Rock,' and 'The River of Rivers in Connecticut' there is a tone not of defeat or even of tepid capacity but of justice; the simultaneous recognition of two facts: one, that the plain sense of things is true of them, however discouraging: "No turban walks across the lessened floor": and two, that nevertheless the mind proceeds, making the most of things by making the most of itself. When Stevens says that "the absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined," we don't feel that the escape clause is a trick, or that it is merely ingenious. We feel the presence of mind that made it possible, and the desperate misgiving that made it necessary.

II

My reading of Stevens, at least in its first long phase, took him at his word; that is, I assumed that his poems were experiments, trials, in the mode of knowledge. His terms of reference — reality, imagination, consciousness, mind — seemed to be the common terms of Romanticism in one of its later phases. The criterion seemed to be truth; to discover the truth of what it means to live in the given world. So I tried to find, among many evidences of difference and contradiction, some governing principle, an abiding attitude or stance, a choice among the available forms of

knowledge. But I found, as every reader of Stevens has found, that there are poems which look every conceivable direction, up and down and all around the town. A conclusion in one poem is ignored in the next, with an equal air of conclusiveness.

' The matter was confounded by my inclination to take Stevens as a philosophical poet, a poet aspiring to a high degree of philosophical coherence. Was he not at least an amateur reader of the big philosophers, and did he not go in for big ideas? The long poems seemed to be pretty earnest, perhaps exacting in the demand they made upon themselves in accuracy and rigor. True, there were short lyrics, cries of their diverse occasions, but Stevens's major effort was the long poem of philosophic ambition, or something resembling it. So it was embarrassing to find that there was no coherent argument, no carefully defined position, which the poems embodied.

I stayed with this general sense of Stevens's poetry far longer than prudence would have advised. There were many critics who warned that he was not a philosopher, and that his recourse to the philosophers was quite unsystematic, indeed flagrantly occasional, that of a sparrow in search of tidbits. Kenneth Burke kept quoting Emerson on moods, that our moods do not believe in one another: if so, why should a life be expected to be more doctrinal than the moods it clearly contained? I don't recall when I began to lose confidence in my way of reading Stevens. Was it when I found other readers, like Frank Kermode, reading his poems as music, and delighting in the cadences as much as in the argument, and probably more? In any case, during the past few years, I started reading Stevens again and found that I wanted to give up his privileged terms, or to go beyond or beneath them. Suppose, for instance, his poems were only ostensibly about reality, imagination, concepts, ideas, the search for the truth of what it means to live in the world. As soon as that supposition entered my head, I found myself translating Stevens's key words into another language, not that of knowledge but of pleasure and desire. The meaning of a poem became the desire it might be supposed to appease. Did this mean going back to Yvor Winters and discovering that he was right about Stevens all along; a hedonist at heart, this poet, according to Winters, and therefore fated to fall into the hedonist's misery, boredom? Not quite; because desire, pleasure, and need were clearly compatible with Emersonian moodiness. If my own life veers between one mood and another, why not Stevens's, too? Besides, Winters was not so much wrong as premature; he introduced the moral issue long before it was required. We must give desire and pleasure their due before bringing in the big moral guns.

Reading Stevens in this way has at least one advantage, it releases me from the frustration of searching for rational principles, explicit forms of order, and so forth. If our moods do not believe in one another, they become compatible precisely in their sequence: one mood, then another, then another. Every poem is occasional, provisional, not doctrinal but accurate to its occasion. A mood, recognised as such, simply means a moment in which

Stevens's desire to transform exterior into interior objects is specific, pointed in that direction. The unity of his poetry is a narrative unity, a matter of sequence, change, and process. Pleasure is what attends upon the successful conversion of exterior to interior objects. Desire means the desire of doing so.

New York University

The Decreations of Wallace Stevens

ELEANOR COOK

Wallace Stevens liked Simone Weil's term "decreation" well enough to quote it in 1951 in *The Relations between Poetry and Painting*. Here is Weil, in *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, on decreation and, in contrast, destruction: "Décréation: faire passer du créé dans l'incrée. Destruction: faire passer du créé dans le néant. Ersatz coupable de la décréation." When Stevens quoted Weil, he translated both definitions (not the last phrase), and added: "Modern reality is a reality of decreation, in which our revelations are not the revelations of belief, but the precious portents of our own powers. The greatest truth we could hope to discover, in whatever field we discovered it, is that man's truth is the final resolution of everything. Poets and painters alike today make that assumption and this is what gives them the validity and serious dignity that become them as among those that seek wisdom, seek understanding. I am elevating this a little, because I am trying to generalize . . ." ¹ "Decreation" is a word now obsolete in English; when it was used, it was synonymous with "destruction": "the undoing of creation; depriving of existence; annihilation" (OED). ² Stevens, following Weil, is using the word in another sense. He is turning her term to his own uses, in a decreation of her decreation, or a borrowing back of religious terms for secular usage. ³ To put it baldly, decreation in Stevens' essay is seeing the *schema* of the world move from a *schema* of something that is created—a world issued, say, by divine fiat from the Logos—to a *schema* of something that is uncreated. A Miltonic poet would not write, as Stevens did in the opening tercet of *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*,

Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea
Of this invention, this invented world,
The inconceivable idea of the sun.

A Miltonic poet would write:

In the beginning, ephebe, you might have perceived
This creation, this created world,
The conceivable idea of the Son.

(This Miltonic poet would have a bad ear.)

It is Stevens' decreations in the first and last poems of *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* that interest me in this essay. I use the word here in the plural to indicate those subtle and thorough and intelligent unweavings of the old traditions of the *créé* in Stevens' work, the decreations that follow from the first essential decreation, the workings of art that change when the *schema* changes. What I wish to do is to look at the first poem of *Notes* as a poem of

genesis and the last poem as a poem of revelation. Neither genesis nor revelation belongs to the order of the *créé*, but both are made to pass into the order of the *incrété*.

Wallace Stevens once thought of giving the first poem of *Notes* a title: "At first I attempted to follow a scheme, and the first poem bore the caption REFACIMENTO. Jean Wahl picked that up right off. The first step toward a supreme fiction would be to get rid of all existing fictions" (L 431). *Refacimento* means a "new-modelling or recasting of a literary work" (OED), here of "existing fictions." A *refacimento* is a getting rid of, but by decreation, not by destroying. The distinction between decreation and destruction was important for Stevens, and I think that his liking for Weil's term decreation stemmed partly from her careful distancing of it from destruction. In 1951, Stevens wrote that the gods had been "dispelled in mid-air and dissolve like clouds" (OP 206), not that the gods had been destroyed. In *Notes* I.i, Phoebus is dispelled and dissolved, though in a trope of earth and not of air. Dispelling and dissolving are kinds of decreation, and it is vital for Stevens that a *refacimento* should decreate rather than attempt to destroy. Any demythologizing that tries to destroy rather than decreate will never "get rid of existing fictions." "Like all reversals, it will remain a captive of that metaphysical edifice which it professes to overthrow."⁴

Let us begin with the voice of the first poem. Presenting simple prolegomena to Stevens' secular dogmatics, at once patient and impatient, giving a rule and promptly disobeying it, exaggerating some sound effects to the point of tedium, giving two sentences of a syllogism and omitting the third—this is a tutelary voice we hear. It stands *in loco parentis* and it sets the tone for all the tutelary or father-son relations of this first poem: the speaker / the ephebe, Phoebus / the ephebe, God the Father and God the Son / the ephebe, perhaps the Rabbi / Nicodemus, and there may be others. For this is what might be called a primal scene of instruction, for both the ephebe and the reader. As with the first chapter of Genesis, "ce prologue apparaîtra d'abord comme un récit didactique destiné à donner une instruction."⁵ Thirty poems later, in the wonderfully tranquil closing poem, the lecture has been moved aside into a lecture-hall, and the voice we hear is at once the poet's and the lover's, which names and also hopes to name his beloved mundo. The first poem is a parental poem, an initiation, a genesis. The last poem is spousal verse, a consummation, a revelation.

It is difficult to begin when no clear point of departure presents itself. *In principio, Fiat lux*, "Of man's first disobedience,"—A supreme fiction of 1942, notes toward, item 1, "It Must Be Abstract," gloss 1, *Refacimento*. "Begin, ephebe . . ." This is a willed propulsion of both voice and ephebe into the poem, an imperative "begin" addressed to a beginner. It is the human or poetic cycle, cut into at an appropriate place—not at the beginning that is birth, but at the beginning that is new being in another sense, the initiation into adult life, the beginning of the break of the child from the parents, the beginning of the break of the supreme fiction from existing fictions. This poem moves from beginning to being, from "begin" to a repeated "be." The *i*

sound if its first words continues (in a b-c pattern with a submerged “be-see” pun^o) through the first two stanzas, then intermittently, to re-emerge strongly in the word “be” used as the end-word of the last two lines. The ephebe must move from beginning to being, just as his poem does, and, like the sun, this son must “be / In the difficulty of what it is to be.”

Beginning into being, then—a progression marked by the hortatory negatives of this opening poem. Except for the first injunction and its repetitions, all the injunctions are negative or enjoin passivity. “Begin . . . by perceiving . . . see the sun again . . . see it clearly.” Even this first commandment has its negative, for the ephebe is to perceive the not-conceivable idea of the sun. He must become not-knowing. He must never suppose an inventing mind; he must not compose a master for that mind. He must let Phoebus lie, slumber, die. He must not give the sun a name. The negatives abound, like forbidding signs on a pilgrim or a fairy-tale wandering. And so they are: they all forbid the least movement that would lead toward the past of “existing fictions,” toward a heaven that has now “expelled us and our images.” The ephebe is sent along a solitary way, and the possibility of a supreme fiction for Stevens begins with an expulsion from the old paradises.

The last of the professor’s hortatory negatives is the most interesting, for he abruptly disobeys it himself. One way of beginning is by disobeying, as we all know, but we are not accustomed to seeing the Primal Instructor himself disobey: “The sun must bear no name, gold flourisher” This is a *felix culpa* indeed, and a useful teaching device. It sets up disobedience as a principle of beginning and not as a fall from grace. It invites the reader and the ephebe to consider different kinds of naming. It calls attention to all the preceding negative commandments in this poem, and suggests that reader and ephebe reflect on what doubleness may lie within their words. It implies that some kinds of naming are permitted and others are not. (This sense of something permissible and something not permissible in Stevens’ naming may surprise us. But his dogmatics are dogmatics, for all that they are secular. Stevens draws a firm line between that sacred and secular, though this is in order to protect the secular from the sacred and not vice versa.) Stevens’ un-naming and re-naming of the sun is not a Coleridgean dissolution that re-creates the essentials of the past in a fresh way. It is an attempt to unweave the essentials, the *schemata* themselves. The sun, which once bore the name of Phoebus or “the shining one,” must now bear no name. “The shining one” is not so different a name from “gold flourisher,” the permitted poetic naming of the sun. In fact, since χρῦσαρος (with sword of gold) was an epithet of Apollo, he was a gold-flourisher of sorts too.⁷ But Phoebus was also the name of a god, and both god and name are now to be dissociated from the sun in an act of un-naming.

“Phoebus is dead, ephebe” is blunt enough to suggest destruction, yet the death of Phoebus is not presented in any trope of *néant*: “Let purple Phoebus lie in umber harvest, / Let Phoebus slumber and die in autumn umber.” Phoebus the sun-god is now to be reclaimed by the earth, “the shining one”

to darken into umber. Phoebus, who has gone riding "across gold Autumn's whole kingdom of corn" (to follow Keats), making them flourish, must now lie down and become part of the harvest himself, though the sun is still gold flourisher. Regal purple is to leave off its associations with regal gold, and submit to the natural cycle of things wherein what was purple and gold becomes umber, and what once rose up lies and slumbers and dies. All this is apparent.

Yet living things that die rot slowly back into compost and become soil that gives life to new plants. Harold Bloom pertinently quotes a line from *The Man with the Blue Guitar* (xxxii) in connection with this poem: "But do not use the rotted names." Stevens does not develop there the trope of the compost-pile that I think underlies the first poem of *Notes*, though he will do so in 1949:

... as of an exhumation returned to earth,

The rich earth, of its own self made rich,
Fertile of its own leaves and days and wars,
Of its brown wheat rapturous in the wind
(CP 491)

In *Notes* l.i, the name of Phoebus has flourished, then dies and will rot away into the uncreated but not into nothingness. Part of Phoebus re-emerges in the ephebe. Though these two Greek words are not connected etymologically, the echo makes a succession clear: "Phoebus is dead, ephebe."⁸ In the parable of the sower, the word is sown. Here we have a natural process, without a sower; the name dies, but the syllable lives as compost (it may as seed, but must as compost), and finds new life in the ephebe.⁹

Something like the law of the conservation of matter is at work here, a law of the conservation of language, so to speak,¹⁰ whereby names are not destroyed but decreated. Like matter, names may rot and break down into their constituents, syllables or letters. They make a richer soil than dead metaphors, and there is no dispute whether they are a source of meaning, for the possibility of all meaning is rooted here. If I read Stevens rightly, he is making use of the analogue between plants and words beloved of poets and linguistic philosophers alike. But he is seeing an entire process, a natural round of plants and names and gods, like the natural rounding of the seasons, a rounding in which plants become soil. Meanings and names grow, flourish, and die, but a ground of language remains. Language does not vanish into an abyss that is a *néant*. As with Lucretius, its letters and syllables form and unform and re-form. (For Lucretius, there exists a given amount of atomic material and no *néant*. The forming, unforming and re-forming of the atoms, he writes, is like the process whereby letters combine to form different words. He liked the analogue well enough to use it five times in the *De Rerum Natura*.¹¹) Yet the ground of language is not a solid floor either, but a soil, a potential for fertility. In this trope, the ground of language is not

reference, but the stuff itself of language, its constituents, composed and re-composed. Reference is one principle of growth.¹²

In *Notes I.i*, we are in a world of sources and of flourishings and of endings, all seen as a continuity, as repetitions with variety. Thus *Notes I.i* is a poem of roots—human roots (parent-son, past-present), vegetable roots (autumn harvest), word roots (per-ceiving and in-con-ceiveable, sup-pose and com-pose). Equally, it is a poem of roundings, of rounded time and even of rounded space. It is full of rounded shapes—a round sky with a round sun seen by a round eye. (These are patterns built into the universe by God, says Augustine in *The City of God* (XII.26), adding the apple to the list of rounded things. Emerson omits the sun and the apple and makes all skies dependent on the eye in the opening sentences of *Circles*: “The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end. It is the highest emblem in the cipher of the world.”) *Notes I.i* is also a poem of the rounding of time. The sun does have a priority, for the ephebe is to begin by perceiving the idea of the sun. But its firstness is not the firstness of the beginning of things. The ephebe will not start with the old Longinian sublime of *Fiat lux*, but simply with *lux*. Or rather, not with *lux* but with *sol*, for it is light as perceived by the human eye that we see in this poem, the familiar, cyclical, diurnal light and not the pre-solar light of Genesis 1:3.

The sun in its shining appropriates the old name, “the shining one,” and it appropriates as well the old light of the metaphor “God is light.” At the same time, Stevens is also decreasing a tradition of usage for shadow and darkness. When God is the “father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning” (*nec vicissitudinis obumbratio*), then eternal light stands in contrast to the revolving lights and shadows of this mutable earth. But when light is defined by the sun, then variableness and shadow become part of true being. Shadow in Christian theology is defined as deprivation. Like evil, it is known through absence and not through presence. In Stevens, shadow becomes presence. The time of shade is not seen against a backdrop of apocalyptic possibility, where time may be stopped, and light prevail. It moves downward to darkness, yet it may also be a time of consummation, as it is in the beautiful final poem of *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*. It is in twilight that the speaker will call his beloved mundo by name.

It is in this context that the descent of Phoebus into autumn umber should be read. Stevens’ instructor hums the god’s obsequies in an art that makes no effort to conceal itself, with a thrice-repeated *um* sound and insistent internal rhymes,¹³ in two soporific humdrum lines. “Umber” by etymology is connected with *umbra*, and the ephebe is under an injunction to let Phoebus descend into autumn umber and enter the realm of the shades where, in the conventional classical phrase, they never see the sun. The sun-god, once the caster of shadow, must become the shadow cast. (*Umbra* is also the word for the slow-moving shadow on a sundial, and for the shadow on the sun in an eclipse.) Phoebus must put on mortality, for *umbra* is a standard figure for human life (*dies nostri quasi umbra*) as well as for the human death

that follows the flowering or flourishing of life (*quasi flos egreditur et conteritur et fugit velut umbra*). As with Saturn, so with Phoebus here: "Fate / Had poured a mortal oil upon his head, / A disanointing poison" (*Hyperion* II.96-8). The sun-god, in this descent into earth, only follows the earth itself, for whom there is variableness and shadow of turning. For all that, he only follows the sun, for the sun too is not without its own variableness and shadow of turning.

In Keats's two *Hyperions*, Apollo succeeds the Titan Hyperion, who must fall from divinity. In Stevens' *Notes I.i*, Phoebus Apollo has fallen before the poem begins, but no god succeeds him, nor does the sun pass into the care of any hands except the poet's. This is a natural fall, and it is not presented as cataclysm but quite casually. Yet it is a fall of greater magnitude than the fall of Satan or of Saturn or of man. With these other epic falls, a greater power remains or succeeds or redeems. Here the gods themselves fall into the seasons (autumn is fall, as Bloom says), subject to that law of nature that rounds off divine and mortal and linguistic lives alike. The greatest fall here is the fall implied in the silent third statement of the professor's syllogism. "The death of one god is the death of all. Phoebus is dead. Therefore . . ." This is the fall of the successor to Phoebus, for whom Phoebus could be an image in the old tradition, that is, of Christ. Just as much of the force of Keats's adjective "disanointing" in the lines on Saturn quoted earlier comes from its play on the meaning of "Christ," so much of the force of Stevens' decreation in *Notes I.i* comes from the English-language pun of sun and son. This is a pun with one silent term in Stevens' poem, yet a pun whose possibility is strongly implied by that absent third statement of the syllogism, and by the old association of the sun with the Son of God.

How neatly do we give one onely name
To parent's issue and the sunne's bright starre!
A *sonne* is light and fruit; a fruitful flame
Chasing the father's dimnesse . . .

At the beginning of the *Paradiso*, Dante invokes Apollo, first by name, *O Buono Apollo* (13), then by *O Divina Virtù* (22). He then moves easily toward the ineffable light that God is, and the beautiful contrast of that light with the *ombra* that is the human perception and expression of it:

O Divina Virtù, se mi ti presti
tanto, che l'ombra del beato Regno
segnata nel mio capo io manifesti.

This is the tradition against which Stevens is moving in his decreation in *Notes I.i*. It is a tradition with far more potency than the classical traditions of the Greek god Phoebus.

Thus, I think, the force of the adjective "inconceivable" in *Notes I.i*. In the old tradition, the created world was made by the Son, who would later be conceived within it. A world that is the "inconceivable idea of the sun" will

not accommodate the conceivable idea of the Son. The sun in *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* cannot be conceived and take human form. For Stevens, such a conception is not possible, and must be decreed. His fiction must be abstract; a compendium, yes, but also a fiction with no necessary incarnation. The first section of *Notes* works toward a vision of major man carefully kept from any association with historical incarnation. "The pensive giant . . . May be the MacCullough" (I.viii). "He is and may be but oh! he is, he is, / This foundling of the infected past" (I.ix). Major man, even when he takes over Christmas imagery as in I.ix, even when he is joyously proclaimed, always also "may be." When he takes over an Islamic formulation, he does so as an abstraction: "The major abstraction is the idea of man / And major man is its exponent" (I.x). It is not that Stevens is proposing a discarnate major man when he uses the word "abstraction." He is not trying to destroy the idea of incarnation but to decreate it.

What he is doing, in effect, is moving it out of figural interpretation and into allegorical interpretation. In doing so, he is moving against the long tradition of *figura*, the tradition that began (to follow Auerbach) with the Pauline epistles.¹⁴ For interpretation through *figura* insists that both figure and fulfillment are historical realities; it stresses the historicity both of the sign and the thing signified. It is true that for Dante, "unlike the ancient poets of the underworld, who represented earthly life as real and the life after death as shadow . . . the other world is the true reality, while this world is only *umbra futurorum*," but "the *umbra* is the prefiguration of the transcendent reality and must recur fully in it." And it is clear that Stevens is returning to the ancient poets. He is also returning to an older method of interpretation than the figural, what Auerbach calls the allegorical method: "We may say roughly that the figural method in Europe goes back to Christian influences, while the allegorical method derives from ancient pagan sources, and also that the one is applied primarily to Christian, the other to ancient material." The freshness and vigor of figural interpretation, developed by Paul and the Church fathers, prevailed over allegorical interpretation, so that, for orthodox Christian theology, such a decreation as Stevens' by definition amounts to a destruction. For Stevens, the sun may be conceived only allegorically; in his terms, the fiction must be abstract. The abstraction may be blooded, but only as a man by thought (I.vi), and not in an incarnation. "It must be visible or invisible, / Invisible or visible or both: / A seeing and unseeing in the eye." This makes no sense as language used logically, or even as figural interpretation (where the visible shadows forth the invisible, and we either see or do not see). But it makes perfect sense as the language of allegorical interpretation.

"You must become an ignorant man again," says the instructor to the ephebe. Reader and ephebe are to shed their old knowledge of a long tradition and become ignorant in the sense of not knowing. Perhaps the ephebe is a Nicodemus, for I keep hearing "You must be born again" behind the professor's sentence, though I am somewhat hesitant about this echo. Nicodemus comes to the eminent rabbi as the ephebe might have come to

the professional persona. He is the biblical type for the literal-minded interpreter, who takes "You must be born again" to mean actual new gestation and rebirth. He is, in effect, given a lesson in metaphor. Stevens' *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* include lessons in how to read older stories, and, if Nicodemus belongs behind this poem, it is as part of such a lesson. He may be present so that Stevens can turn the biblical narrative against itself, in an extraordinary gesture of decreation. For Christ's reply to Nicodemus could be used by an allegorical interpreter to combat the traditional figural interpretation of the incarnation itself. The ephebe would then conceive of incarnation in a different way; he would become ignorant and shed the knowledge of God which he had been given.

Let us move forward to the last of the series of poems that make up *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* ("Fat girl, terrestrial, my summer, my night"). To move from the first poem to the last is to enter another dispensation, another order of language. We leave far behind the tutelary voice and enter the saying of a lover's voice, as if we had moved from law into grace. Here, the only authority is that of one lover over another, free (for a moment) from the anxiety of influence. For here, in this most felicitous of all the unions in *Notes*, the poetic voice has left its father and its mother, and is cleaving unto the fat girl. There are no dogmatics here, and no overview of the universe. The focus is human, with a knowledge beyond dogmatics. It is only in a limited way that we read this poem as a *refacimento*. Yet in one important way, I think it is.

The last poem has in common with the first an act of naming, and both acts are mysterious. In the first poem, the ephebe is told that the sun must bear no name, and at once given a name for it. In the last, the fat girl is given names throughout, but the climax of the poem is a joyful anticipation of the time when "I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo," as if the names so far had not been true or complete names. When this future naming happens, the poem ends except for one line: "You will have stopped revolving except in crystal." A mundo that has stopped revolving has come to the end of things (except in crystal) and to a revelation of sorts in this most anti-apocalyptic of poets.

There are two common biblical analogues for the way the poet names: the divine fiat of Genesis 1:3 and Adam's naming of the creatures. For Stevens, I think the divine fiat is too strong a claim even as analogue. "I have not but I am and as I am, I am" (*Notes* III.viii) is a human claim, echoing "I am that I am" but with a difference. (Bloom notes that it is also a parody of Coleridge's theory of the primary imagination.¹⁵) The difference is in the *non habeo*. The *esse* of God is one with not only *posse* and *nosse*, but also with *habere*, "for it is what it has" (*id quod habet est*).¹⁶ To be, for the eternal "I am" means to have simultaneously and indivisibly power and knowledge; for the human poet, "I have not but I am." The divine Logos issues instantly in act; it is act. A divine fiat is noun and verb at once. But the human word is "a something in our mind, which we toss to and fro by revolving it this way or that"; "the

true word then comes into being, when, as I said, that which we toss to and fro by revolving it arrives at that which we know, and is formed by that."¹⁷ What Stevens does in *Notes*, I think, is to divide the functions of the biblical "I am." The sun retains the being and causation attributed to God, and embodies the principle of reality. The poet takes over the being and the naming attributed to God, and embodies the principle of imagination. But the poet's naming is wholly human.

Adam's naming of the creatures is a human and not a divine naming, though it is sanctioned by an overseeing God. Because it is primal, and because it is "according to nature," that is, onomatopoeia, this kind of naming remains a type for our experience with every good poem—our sense of the freshness of language, as if it were used for the first time, and the rightness of language, as if it were used entirely according to the nature of the subject.

But Adam performs another act of naming in Eden, and he performs it twice. He names Eve. Her first, unfallen name, stressing her oneness with Adam, is Woman; her second, fallen name, stressing her priority and her fertility, is Eve (one Latin translation is *Vita*). (I follow the narrative as presented in the canon, and disregard different sources for the Book of Genesis.) Adam is thus the first human namer of a human being, that is, of a creature who is both namer and named. The creatures that Adam names are only named; they have not the gift of words. "The lion roars . . . Master by foot and jaws and by the mane" (*Notes I.v*), but not by the anagram "name." Humans who are named can answer back.

The voice of *Notes III.x* may be heard as the voice of an Adam because it will name in an extraordinary way.¹⁸ But I suggest that it will name its Eve rather than the creatures. And I think its naming will go beyond the naming of Eve by Adam. For Stevens, it seems to me, here combines the first Adam with a second Adam (not Christ but a Civil, so to speak) in this final de-creating and re-creating of the biblical "I am." He is showing us this "I am" in the act of naming, not only as Adam names Eve, but also as the second Adam calls by name. He is claiming for poetry not only the primal act of naming, but also the final act of naming; not only the naming that is of a new creation, but also the naming that is itself a revelation. He can only do this, of course, when he has made perfectly clear that no vestige of the authority of the old "I am" will remain in his new supreme fiction. But all this needs some enlarging.

"I am" in this poem takes a predicate; it is not used simply as a verb of existence. It makes a statement of identity, with the "I" now naming himself ("Civil, Madam, I am . . ."). Stevens' speaker is a new Adam; he is, as it were, a Civil. This word bears a good deal of weight, coming as it does at the beginning of a line, in a reversed word order that may recall a Latin order of words and things (*civis Romanus sum*). It is a word beautifully balanced with "sensation" in this lover's monologue, and it carries the sense of "courteous." But it also bears other senses. I hope that it does not sound wildly improbable to suggest that this "I am" may recall the most famous palindrome of them all, for I think it may, with a difference. This is a peculiarly

Stevensian Adam. This Adam will name his mundo or his Eve at twilight, this being an English-language poem; Stevens will undo any association of twilight with imperfect, unfulfilled knowledge, and it may be that he is undoing any Eve-evil-evening associations.¹⁹ The girl named is fertile, like Eve; hence her fatness and domesticity and general ease of being. She is a mundo at its most fecund or summery. But she bears no sense of being fallen; she is firmly a mundo, mundane but not guilty. And this Adam is not so much man made of dust and part of the earth as he is man as citizen. "Civil," "citizen," and their cognates are strong words in Stevens,²⁰ and represent the full flowering of an ephebe. Adam, the archetypal ephebe, comes to completion in biblical narrative only in the second Adam. In Stevens' *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, he moves from an ephebe to a citizen, who can walk the streets of his city in a fulfillment. For "civil" may bear here a third and obsolete sense: "naturally good or virtuous, but unregenerate; moral; good as a citizen but not as a saint" (OED 15.b).

If I am right that Stevens here merges the first and second Adam, then he may also merge the naming by the first Adam with the naming by the second Adam. The ordinary kind of naming is a family affair, where we are both named (as children) and namers (as parents), as in the A-begat-B of the Old Testament.²¹ But human beings may receive a second name, a name that is a claim and a possession, a sign of reconciliation in biblical literature, a true name. Jacob becomes Israel; Simon becomes Peter. In Revelation, the act of naming is the act or action of the whole book, balancing the naming by the "I am" in Genesis with a final naming by the Logos as the "I am." Here things become known by their true and final names, names that are their being and their fate. If the second Adam calls by name a mundo or Eve ("I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo"), it is no ordinary naming. "Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine."

What Stevens does here, I think, is to merge part of the myth of Genesis and part of the vision of Revelation in a final rounding of things. For biblical narrative ends with the vision of a city and citizens; so does Stevens, though his citizen is civil and not saintly, and his city earthly for all its golden streets. Biblical narrative ends with a union, a marriage of the Spirit and the Bride, or of Christ and the Church, and one tradition of interpretation saw the union of Adam and Eve as a figure for the union of the second Adam and the Church Triumphant. The fat girl is an Eve in her fecundity. She is the poet's mundo and the mother of his poems, which are given first and final being in his naming. When he calls by name, he will in one act make and redeem as a human "I am" may. For Stevens, in whom there is no apocalypse, there may yet be revelation, though "our revelations are not the revelations of belief" (NA 175).

Description is revelation

A text we should be born that we might read,
More explicit than the experience of sun

And moon, the book of reconciliation,
Book of a concept only possible

In description, canon central in itself,
The thesis of plentifullest John.

(CP 345)

In this final act of naming, only anticipated and not performed in *Notes*, the *sum* does not move toward a *fiat* but toward an *es*. Between the "I am" of the poet and the "it is" of the sun lies the possibility of the "you are" of the poem. And we recall the moving prologue to *Notes*, toward which this last poem points.

Even the sea in Stevens' revelation may become benign. It does not disappear as in the Apocalypse, where there is no more sea; it cannot, in Stevens' dualism. It takes human shape, as in the legend of Proteus, for that legend too "requires / That I should name you flatly, waste no words, / Check your evasions, hold you to yourself." In this poem, the old man of the sea is metamorphosed into the woman of the world of fecundity. In Genesis, the Spirit broods over the waters, and in Revelation the Spirit takes a Bride. Here the waters become part of the beloved, for she is "my green, my fluent mundo," green with the new growth of earth and green as the sea; fluent with the flowing of waters and also of tongues, "as if the waves at last were never broken, / As if the language suddenly, with ease, / Said things it had laboriously spoken" (*Notes* I.viii). As with the redeemed who are called by name, as with Proteus, as with a heavenly muse, it is as if an answer may be given by that "fluent," as if, in a Stevensian revelation, for a moment, the possible impossible happens, and one's earth replies to one's imagination. This is how poems come into being.

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NOTES

1. *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York, 1965), p. 175; hereafter cited as *NA*. Other abbreviations used are: *CP*, for *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York, 1954); *L*, for *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York, 1966).

2. "Décréation" is not listed in the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* (8^e éd.) or in the *Grand Larousse* (1972). It does appear in the *Dictionnaire de l'Ancienne Langue Française . . . du IX^e au XV^e siècle*: "décréation, s. f., diminution." Weil's usage appears to be new and her own.

3. Cf. Kenneth Burke: "We can borrow back the terms from the borrower, again secularizing to varying degrees the originally secular terms that had been given 'supernatural' connotations" (*The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* (Berkeley, 1970), p. 7).

4. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, 1976), p. 19.

5. Paul Ricoeur, in Roland Barthes et al., *Exégèse et herméneutique* (Paris, 1971), p. 71.

6. Cf. P. Furia and M. Roth, "Stevens' Fussy Alphabet," *PMLA*, 93 (1978), 66-77.

7. Liddell and Scott list *ll.* 5.509, 15.256, and Pindar, *Pythian Odes* 5.104.
8. Joseph Riddel reads a different inference in *The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens* (Baton Rouge, 1965), p. 169.
9. On death in Stevens' work, see Richard Ellmann, "Wallace Stevens' Ice-Cream," *Kenyon Review*, 19 (1957), 89–105, and Northrop Frye, "Wallace Stevens and the Variation Form," in *Literary Theory and Structure: Essays in Honor of William K. Wimsatt* (New Haven, 1973), ed. Frank Brady et al., pp. 413–14.
10. On a "conservatory" of language, see Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny (Toronto, 1977), pp. 321–2. On a "herbarium" of language, see Ricoeur on Heidegger and Derrida, *ibid.*, p. 284.
11. *De Rerum Natura* I.197, 823–7, 907–14; II.688–94, 1015–18.
12. For some implications of the figure of a referential ground of language, see, for example, Geoffrey Hartman, "Monsieur Texte II: Epiphany in Echoland," *Georgia Review*, 30 (1976), 194; and J. Hillis Miller, "Tradition and Difference," *Diacritics*, 2.iv (1972), 11, and "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure," *Georgia Review*, 30 (1976), 28–30.
- With my argument, cf. Charles Berger: "'Ground,' however, is an ambiguous term, one which can refer to language as well as to reality beyond words"; "when ground is taken as language it both sustains and threatens; it generates new language at the same time that it seems to shadow the new poetic speaker" ("The Early and Middle Poetry of Wallace Stevens," Yale University Ph.D. dissertation, 1977, Abstract, and p. 4).
13. Michel Benamou hears these rhymes accentuating "le mensonge de l'euphémisation religieuse: *lie* devient *die*, *slumber* devient *umber*" (*L'Oeuvre-Monde de Wallace Stevens: Thèse présentée devant l'Université de Paris* (Paris, 1975), p. 313).
14. Erich Auerbach, "Figura," in his *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Gloucester, Mass., 1973), pp. 71, 63.
15. *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca, 1977), p. 169.
16. Augustine, in *Joannis Evangelium Tractatus XCIX.4*. Cf. Etienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto, 1952), especially the last chapter on the use of the verb "to be."
17. Augustine, *De Trinitate* XV.xv.
18. Cf. Riddle, *The Clairvoyant Eye*, p. 183.
19. See Patricia A. Parker, "The Vision of Eve," in her *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode* (Princeton, 1979), pp. 114–23.
20. See, for example, *CP* 479, 529; *NA* 116; *L* 409.
21. And even ordinary family naming may be uncannily connected with being. "It was essential that infanticide take place prior to naming, since killing a named child might offend the spirit of the reincarnated person, and so the naming of unborn children in hopes of easing childbirth did restrain mothers from practicing infanticide" (Asen Balikci, *The Netsilik Eskimo* (Garden City, 1970), p. 149).

The Figure of the Virile Poet as Youth: "Carnet de Voyage" and Stevens' Journals

WALLACE MARTIN

During the past twelve years, the publication of Stevens' letters, journals, and early poems has made it possible to undertake the hazardous task of reconstructing his poetic development during what Joseph Riddel has called "that mysteriously silent decade of 1900-1910." Books by Robert Buttel and A. Walton Litz have provided a plausible account of his evolution during those years.¹ They show us how Stevens emerged from fin-de-siècle aestheticism and the minor poetic currents of the 1900's (Vagabondia, chinoiserie) to assimilate and master the Symbolist and Imagist modes characteristic of the poetic renaissance. Stevens appears to fit quite conveniently into this genetic explanation. Since his early poems are of little value (a conclusion for which Stevens provides a precedent, since he did not publish most of those written between 1901 and 1914), they can be treated as a farrago of unassimilated influences and imperfect images that were to contribute to his later work. Having established the main lines of his development, we know what to look for and what remains to be discovered.

But one oddity obtrudes from this otherwise satisfactory account. How are we to explain the emergence of the mature ("Sunday Morning") and experimental ("The Silver Plough-Boy") Stevens of 1915, given the ineptness of his earlier work? According to Buttel, we see a "sudden leap from uncertainty to mastery" in that year (p. 230). According to Litz, "in 1914 and 1915 the long-suppressed creativity of a major poet was suddenly released" (p. 21)—though he qualifies this statement by pointing out the serious weaknesses of the poems published in 1914 ("Carnet de Voyage" and "Phases"). An attempt to explain this seemingly inexplicable rift in Stevens' career would force us to re-examine current assumptions about the "sources" of Stevens' work and the genetic pattern of creative development that may appear to be an inescapable part of our concept of literature.

Given what we know of Stevens and modern poetry, we know where to look for influences on his early work. Consider, for example, "Carnet de Voyage"—a pivotal sequence in the accounts provided by Buttel and Litz, since it exemplifies Stevens' early mannerisms (most of it having been written in 1909) and is at the same time the first work he published after the undergraduate poems of 1898-1900. Buttel finds traces of Mallarmé's influence in the first poem of the sequence: among other verbal parallels, he cites Mallarmé's "séraphins" and "séraphique" as possible sources of Stevens' seraph (pp. 104-05). In the third poem of the sequence, he finds an Impressionistic use of color parallel to (but of course not derived from) that of the Imagists, as well as the influence of Japanese color prints (pp. 69-70)—a conclusion accepted by Litz (pp. 17-18). In the sixth poem ("Man from the waste evolved / The Cytherean glade") and elsewhere, Buttel sees the

mannerisms of Richard Hovey, Bliss Carman, and other poets of the period.

I cannot deny that the influences suggested by Buttell and Litz are confirmed by “Carnet de Voyage” and everything we know about Stevens. At the same time, however, if we set aside their assumptions and expectations—leaving all the factual evidence we have in place—an alternative or supplementary account of Stevens’ development could be constructed, as George Bornstein has implied.² During the summer of 1899, before enrolling in “English Literature, 1798–1832,” Stevens was reading *Endymion* (*Letters*, p. 28; p. 33n.).³ He planned to see the manuscript of the poem when it was exhibited at Columbia University in 1908; in June, 1909, shortly after sending the group of poems that constitute the substance of “Carnet de Voyage” to his future wife, he mentioned rereading *Endymion* and quoted two lines from Book II (*Letters*, p. 110; p. 148). Keats can be used to explain verbal details of “Carnet de Voyage” that would otherwise be apportioned to Impressionism, Symbolism, proto-Imagism, and Orientalism. Were Japanese prints necessary for the creation of “Small fishes gleam, / Blood-red and hue / Of shadowy blue, / And amber sheen” (“Carnet,” III)? Why not Keat’s “fish, / Golden, or rainbow-sided, or purplish, / Vermilion-tail’d, or finn’d with silvery gauze” (*Endymion*, II, 109–11)? We need not go to French poetry for seraphs; “The Eve of St. Agnes,” XXXI, and Shelley’s *Epipsychidion*, l. 21, provide more than enough. The “Cytherean glade,” “isle,” and “white doves” of “Carnet de Voyage, VI” can conveniently be derived from the “Cytherea’s isle” and “white doves” of *Endymion*, II, 492; 523.

But such derivations are not germane to the reading of “Carnet de Voyage” and of Stevens’ development that I want to propose. The influence of Romantic poets on his work can safely be left in the hands of Harold Bloom, George Bornstein, and Helen Vendler. It should by now be clear that there is no single set of “sources” for Stevens’ early poetry. Since *all* of those suggested are relevant, we are left with a network of “courses,” superimposed incisions, that constitute the occlusion or opacity enabling us to “see” his work. In order to argue that “Carnet de Voyage” exemplifies something more than the “dated charm” of “outmoded poems” (Buttell, p. 62; Litz, p. 11), I shall arbitrarily assign priority to one of the many sources from which the sequence may have been constituted: Baudelaire. The purpose of this choice may as well be declared at the outset: it can be used to reveal (while assuming) the depth and complexity of his poetic practice between 1907 and 1914.

In discussing “Carnet de Voyage, VI,” which concerns a voyage to Cythera, Buttell suggests that its atmosphere is derived from Verlaine’s *Fêtes Galantes* and the eighteenth-century paintings alluded to in Verlaine’s title (pp. 57–59). If this suggestion is traced to its sources, Stevens’ poem appears in an entirely different light. In 1717 the French Academy, confronted with a painting that could not be assigned to any traditional genre, created a new genre—the *fête galante*—rather than rejecting it. That painting was Watteau’s *L’Embarquement à Cythère*. A literary recreation of the scene depicted by Watteau appears in the chapter of Gérard de Nerval’s *Sylvie*

entitled "Un Voyage à Cythère." Stevens' journal for 1906 contains a quotation from this work⁴, and he alludes to it in a letter written three years later (p. 238). The search for sources could end here—were it not for the fact that there is no evident relationship between the scene in *Sylvie* and the primal voyage of discovery in Stevens' poem.

The voyage to Cythera in *Sylvie* (published in 1853) is in fact a nostalgic actualization of a fantasy that had previously been shattered by reality. In 1844, Nerval's account of a purported visit to Cythera had appeared in *l'Artiste* with the title "Voyage à Cythère" (the title was dropped when the article was collected for republication in *Scènes de la vie Orientale*, 1848, and *Voyage en Orient*, 1851.⁵ Having sought the imaginary fulfillment depicted in Watteau's painting and later recreated in *Sylvie*, Nerval was shocked to discover the desolation of modern Cythera:

That was my dream . . . and here is my awakening! Sky and sea are still there; every morning the sky of the Orient, the Ionian sea give each other the sacred kiss of love; but the earth is dead, dead at the hand of man, and the gods have flown away! To return to prose, it must be said that of all Cythera's beauties, none remains but its porphyry rocks, as dreary to see as simple sandstone. . . . I sought the shepherds and shepherdesses of Watteau, their garlanded ships approaching flowery shores; I dreamed mad bands of the pilgrims of Love in cloaks of iridescent satin . . . I saw nothing but a "gentleman" shooting at woodcocks and pigeons, and some pensive blond Scotch soldiers, searching the horizon, perhaps for the mists of their homeland. (*Oeuvres*, II, 64).⁶

Nerval, "son of a century disinherited of dreams, needing to touch in order to believe" (*Oeuvres*, II, 67), comes to realize, as did Stevens, that it was foolish to visit Cythera. He compares himself to Polyphile, the imaginary author of Charles Nodier's novel *Franciscus Columba*, who, having avoided Nerval's mistake, "knew the real Cythera by virtue of never having visited it" (II, 67). Nerval then recounts how the protagonists of that novel, through the purity of a love that continued to grow after they had entered holy orders, broke through the limits of time and space to recreate all of classical Greece in their imaginary pilgrimage to the island of Venus, where they were granted spiritual union. Immediately after this lyrical passage, Nerval describes how he had seen what appeared to be the outline of a statue as he sailed along the coast of Cythera. On approaching closer, however, he discovered it was a three-branched gibbet ("the first real gibbet I had ever seen"), one arm of which was furnished (*garnie*) with a corpse (II, 70-71). It is these passages that served as the source of Baudelaire's "Un Voyage à Cythère."

In the first stanza of "Carnet de Voyage, VI," Stevens presents the island of love as a place created by the mind and only subsequently inhabited:

Man from the waste evolved
The Cytherean glade,
Imposed on battering seas
His keel's dividing blade,
And sailed there, unafraid. (Litz, p. 303)⁷

As in "Blanche McCarthy," the cosmos is created in consciousness and imaginatively projected to be seen in the mirror of the outer world. Similarly, Baudelaire (like Nerval) shows a man sailing to an island produced by the imagination:

Quelle est cette île triste et noire? —C'est Cythère,
Nous dit-on, un pays fameux dans les chansons,
Eldorado banal de tous les vieux garçons.
Regardez, après tout, c'est une pauvre terre.

The second stanza of Stevens' poem echoes Baudelaire's reference to songs ("It was a place to sing in") and mentions, in successive lines, two symbols associated with Venus ("For white doves to wing in, / And roses to spring in"). Baudelaire places the same two symbols in successive lines: "un jardin de roses . . . le roucoulement éternel d'un ramier."

Stevens laconically remarks of man's imagined Cythera that when he sailed there, "The isle revealed his worth," not mentioning the corpse that Nerval and Baudelaire's voyager actually saw instead of the roses and doves they expected. When Stevens returned to the island forty years later, in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven, XXI," he used its French name—"Cythère." "The shepherd and his black forms" of the later poem echoes the darker side of Baudelaire (the "île triste et noir," leading to "Pour moi tout était noir et sanglant désormais"). Direct reference to the ghastly side of "Un Voyage à Cythère" would have been inappropriate in a poem that Stevens sent to his fiancée in 1909. And there was no reason to add hints about the connection with Baudelaire when the poem was published in 1914. For those aware of it, the implication was present, just as the surviving pages of his journal tell us all we need to know about those that were excised.

But Baudelaire and Stevens' later poetry lead us away from the matter at hand. They should not be allowed to obscure the main point of "Carnet de Voyage"—the priority of the mind in the construction of reality. Stevens knew what all Americans know: in the words of Saul Bellow's Henderson, "All travel is mental travel." I would not argue that Bellow was one of his sources; returning to the sober chronology of influence, we could look to Emerson, whose collected works he owned. Having seen what Rome and Naples had to offer, Emerson said to himself: "Thou foolish child, hast thou come out hither, over four thousand miles of salt water, to find that which was perfect to thee there at home? . . . That which I fancied I had left in

Boston was here in the Vatican, and again at Milan, and at Paris, and made all travelling ridiculous as a tread-mill" ("Art"). The protagonist of "Carnet de Voyage," having learned the lesson taught by Emerson and Nerval (or having discovered it for himself), does not go anywhere, except in imagination. For one who looks at aquarelles and reads books, "All things are old" (V of the sequence); experience gives him only an uncanny sense of *déjà lu*.

Stevens the Modernist, Stevens the Romantic, and Stevens the American are necessary figures of the critical imagination, confirming the fact that literature is always, for us, the *déjà lu*. Minor verse is especially difficult to read because we cannot escape the conviction that we have seen it somewhere before. For that reason I want to return to "Carnet de Voyage," which may now be obscured by too much literary history, and attempt to provide, in the manner of early Stevens criticism, a minimal explication of the sequence, avoiding the exploration of subtleties that solicit the reader's attention at every turn.

Even if we do not think of Tennyson's Ulysses, who set sail at dusk "to follow knowledge like a sinking star," there is something odd in beginning a travel note-book with an entry about evening. Journeys usually start in the morning. In this case, however, we are dealing with a spiritual departure in which the heavens are stripped of their theological and cultural accretions to reveal the world's body:

An odor from a star
Comes to my fancy, slight,
Tenderly spiced and gay,
As if a seraph's hand
Unloosed the fragrant silks
Of some sultana, bright
In her soft sky. . . .

The seraph (usually feminine in Romantic poetry, but in this case masculine) disrobes a sultana and then drops his own blue garment . . . at which point the simile ends. We do not find out whether the ecumenical and annunciative possibilities of the scene (Christian and Mohammedan, divine and earthly) are realized. As soon as the simile is stated, it is caught up in the mobility of signification: a star is like a sultana, first as mistress in a seraglio, then as a pale-yellow grape (which is of course the star—hence its proleptic "odor"). In any case, the trappings of divine significance have been divested, and the voyager is prepared to commence discovery of a reality "void / Of our despised decay." On first reading, this phrase can be taken to indicate that thoughts of mortality, and the religious concerns that they often prompt, will for the moment be set aside.

In the second poem of the sequence the traveller, rather than dallying over particular tourist attractions in his newly revealed world, sees all of it at once. As the green and blue of corn and lake fade into darkness, the green and blue of bamboo and desert pool appear in the sunlit Orient. Thus he discovers endless repetition:

The changing green and blue
Flow round the changing earth;
And all the rest is empty wondering and sleep.

In section III, fixing himself in a single spot, the traveller studies the green and blue, thereby discovering metamorphosis. As the grass grows, the fish in a stream display all but one of the primary and secondary colors. The last of these appears as a “yellow flash”—triggering a transformation in which the yellow becomes a flame that leaves in its wake “diamond ash.” The hardest, most brilliant, and (barring intense heat) most enduring of physical substances cannot escape change. Mortality, having been bracketed for two brief lyric moments, reappears.

Section IV, like II, juxtaposes two parts of the world and then draws a conclusion from their similarities:

She that winked her sandal fan
Long ago in gray Japan—

She that heard the bell intone
Rendezvous by rolling Rhone—

How wide the spectacle of sleep,
Hands folded, eyes too still to weep!

The Rhone appears as a metamorphosis of the “stream” in the preceding section. The flirtatious Japanese woman and the one once headed for a rendezvous in Europe may be alike because both were involved in romantic relationships. “The spectacle of sleep” could refer to dreaming (does the traveller see these women, and the previous poems, in a dream?); on the other hand, the hieratic pose in the last line suggests another kind of sleep, and something else that the women may have in common. Bells intone more than one kind of rendezvous. Inescapably, they knell our death. The attempt to set death aside at the end of the first poem was doomed from the start, if only because of the mobility of language. The “void” in “Sweet exhalations, void / Of our despised decay” can be read as an adjective or as an appositive noun: the place devoid of our decay is identical to the void of our decay.

The opening lines of the fifth poem involve an ontological ruse that Stevens was to employ again in “Dry Loaf”: a series of images is presented in such a way as to blur the distinctions between thought, reality, and artistic representation:

I am weary of the plum and of the cherry,
And that buff moon in evening’s aquarelle,
I have no heart within to make me merry.
I nod above the books of Heaven or Hell.

Up to this point, there has been no reference to the "I" who speaks the poem. When we encounter him, it is evening (as it was when the poem began). Perhaps he has spent the whole evening reading, and the glimpses of his travels in the preceding sections were in fact dreams that he had when he nodded off over his books. Does the "or" in the last line mean that there are two sets of books, or that there is only one set and he hasn't decided which category they belong to? Has any voyage, real or imagined, been undertaken? In any case, as the following lines show, the speaker cannot escape the figural repetitions that preclude any definite beginning or end. The assertion that "all things are old" is deliberately juxtaposed with reference to "the new-born swallows"; "The dust of Babylon is in the air," as a result of its past destruction and its prefigured consummation at the end of time (Isaiah, 47, 1; Revelations). The escape from transcendental assumptions and the prelapsarian engagement with the world posited in the first poem of the sequence were a repetition (inevitably) of acts foretold in literature.

Poem VI, the voyage to Cythera that has already been discussed, attempts to resolve the paradoxes that precede it (reality vs. mental and verbal fabrication, pastness vs. immediate presence) through a mythical account in which man imagines a reality that he subsequently discovers. The paradoxes of temporality are further explored in VII (a rocket "brings primeval night again," after which "the old-time dark returns").⁸ A poem entitled "Home Again" was apparently intended to end the sequence (Litz, pp. 11-12); the title is of course ironic, since the traveller set forth only in imagination. As originally published, the sequence ends with "On an Old Guitar," in which a woman sings a simple tune banishing the morose reflections sung (in V) by the traveller. Its refrain, as Buttell notes, is from a song in *As You Like It*, V, iii. Stevens had seen the play in 1904 (*Souvenirs and Prophecies*, p. 130). Shakespeare's song is about country matters, and the sexual allusion may be as important as the song for the relief of the traveller's melancholy.

If the foregoing interpretation of "Carnet de Voyage" is plausible, what conclusions does it suggest regarding Stevens' development as a poet? First, that we should be prepared to revise the biographical assumptions on which current interpretations of Stevens' early poetry are based. There is no compelling reason to assume that a writer of unimpressive verse is intellectually immature, or that a powerful mind must inevitably produce great poetry. Some reviewers of *Souvenirs and Prophecies*, lulled by the studied impersonality and apparent casualness of the journals, have failed to point out what an astonishing document they are. While Holly Stevens' decision to include commentary and extracts from letters in that volume was probably a wise one, the resultant format muffles the energy and enigmatic complexity of the journals themselves. Consider what a facsimile edition, with blank spaces left for excisions, might look like. To judge from surviving evidence, the range of Stevens' reading before 1914 equals that of Pound and Eliot. Allusions and fragmentary jottings suggest familiarity with the works of unmentioned poets and philosophers—as in the case of the entries in 1905 and 1906 that seem to be derived from detailed acquaintance with Nietzsche.⁹ We must discover some means of reconciling ourselves to the

disparity between the apparent wistfulness of the early poems and the tough-minded selfconsciousness of a man who could refer to the emptiness of "that much idolized source of pathetic martyrdom, *mon pauvre coeur!*" (*Souvenirs*, p. 145). We must, perhaps, accept Nietzsche's dictum that everything deep loves a mask and read the journals as a literary document requiring detailed explication.

Having questioned our assumptions about Stevens' intellectual development, we might consider alternatives to the accepted mythical account of the genesis and development of the artist. Rather than explaining Stevens' poetic mastery as a creation *ex nihilo*, we could test the myths which claim that the world was created through the dismemberment of the old gods. In this light, Stevens' nihilistic analyses of the self, morality, religion, man, and his own desires in the journals would appear as the primal decreation of reality from which the creative word could be born. The distance between "life" and creativity is exemplified by "Carnet de Voyage." The young man who yearned to go abroad and saved money for his passage (*Souvenirs*, p. 90, p. 97), who looked on London as "the ultimate point of romance" (p. 234, p. 238), deliberately denied himself the satisfaction of fulfilling his dreams and wrote travel poems instead. Why? Because, although we desire the new (*Souvenirs*, p. 239), "all things are old" ("Carnet de Voyage"); and whatever else may be true of desire, it does not admit of limitation and hence cannot be satisfied by particular objects or places (*Souvenirs*, p. 90). Death—not of desire, but of the romantic illusion that it could ever be satisfied—marks the creative birth of the "modern" poet and accounts for his ambivalent relationship to Romanticism.

But how can this insight, freed of nostalgia, become a productive source of poetic creation? The most obvious answer—that a meaning wrested from thought and experience need only be embodied in poetic language—is obviously the wrong one. In the creative process, the death of illusion seems to be connected with a death of "meaning" in the ordinary, propositional sense. The first phase of Stevens' creative activity (1898–1914) involved a progressive effacement of meaning from his poetry. Between 1900 and 1907, he began to hide the content of his poems under a deceptively simple period style. His explication of three words in a poem sent to his fiancée (*Souvenirs*, p. 239) shows how much meaning he could put into a single lyric—and how little the reader is likely to extract from it without extratextual hints. Part of the difficulty is our own: we are anaesthetized into inattention by the style of that period. Unlike Stevens, we find it difficult to see "Hafiz and Omar" through the perfumed mist of Victorian translations and think of them as significant because of their "poetic thought" (*Souvenirs*, p. 167). Thought, important as it is, stood in Stevens' way. It led to the truths of Ecclesiastes, burying each vivid impression under an avalanche of belatedness ("Once more the young starlight"—a juxtaposition of old and new—is typical of the poems of this period). Stevens realized this (*Souvenirs*, p. 175) and, like Crispin, he had to lose his knowledge and his self in order to become a poet. The thoughts of his youth could re-enter his poetry only after he had effaced meaning and mastered language as such.¹⁰ A similar

process is evident in Nerval: after the romantic dream of Cythera had been shattered by the imaginative "reality" of desolation and death, the dream could be re-enacted in his later work.

Stevens' development confirms Paul de Man's comment that literature "does not fulfill a plenitude but originates in the void that separates intent from reality. The imagination takes its flight only after the void, the inauthenticity of the existential project has been revealed; literature begins where the existential demystification ends and the critic has no need to linger over this preliminary stage. Consideration of the actual and historical existence of writers are a waste of time from a critical viewpoint."¹¹ But the very recognition of the void and its relationship to creation leads de Man into an allegorical flight beyond his original perception. A change in understanding is projected as an escape into an orbit beyond the gravity of existence. Literature does indeed begin where demystification ends, but time and existence go on, and there is no end to beginnings. The poet's works will of course be misunderstood if they are explained through reference to biography, but both will be misunderstood if their interaction is disregarded.

One possible misunderstanding must be precluded: my interpretation of "Carnet de Voyage" and the biographical conjectures it has prompted are not intended to demonstrate that the poem has been undervalued. Stevens' criticism always runs the danger of equating intellectual complexity with literary distinction. "Carnet de Voyage" is, as Buttell and Litz have said, stylistically similar to other poems of the 1900's. Its fin-de-siècle ennui, hypothetical (rather than experiential) images, and emotional poses can be seen as "errors" of an irremediable sort: they involve matters of *taste*. Readers want serious problems to be purveyed seriously. A seraph in a seraglio and a striptease revealing a grape are precious and complicated beyond words. One idea from the sequence, spread across several pages of resonant pentameters and corporealizing the experiences of a woman contemplating mortality, can result in a great poem. Ideas must be disposed in an order conformable to the human imagination if they are to be useful in poetry.

Setting aside the question of value, my reading is intended to suggest that "Carnet de Voyage" is thematically more complex than most of the poems in *Harmonium*; that in important ways it prefigures *The Comedian as the Letter C*, that it involves an ontological thematic that most critics have associated only with Stevens' middle and late poetry; and that, together with the journals, it can serve as the basis of a new conception of his literary development between 1898 and 1914.

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NOTES

1. Riddel, "Wallace Stevens," *Sixteen Modern American Authors*, ed. Jackson R. Bryer (New York: Norton, 1973), p. 565; Buttel, *Wallace Stevens: The Making of Harmonium* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1967); Litz, *Introspective Voyager: The Poetic Development of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972).
2. *Transformations of Romanticism in Yeats, Eliot, and Stevens* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 165-68.
3. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1966).
4. *Souvenirs and Prophecies, The Young Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York, Knopf, 1977), p. 170.
5. There is no evidence that Stevens was acquainted with either of these works. However, he had read not only *Sylvie* but *Aurélia* and Nerval's poems (the quotation from Pythagoras on p. 170 of *Souvenirs and Prophecies* is the epigraph of "Vers dorés"); his interest in Nerval may have led him to works not mentioned in the journals.
6. Ed. Albert Béguin and Jean Richer (Paris: Gallimard, 1960).
7. Litz reprints the entire text of "Carnet de Voyage" on pp. 302-04. The sequence can also be pieced together in Buttel's book (see p. 255). In *Souvenirs and Prophecies*, the sections of the poem appear on the following pages: I and II (pp. 259-60), III (p. 228), IV (p. 230), V (p. 233), VI (p. 230), VII (p. 234), VIII (p. 260).
8. This poem may have been inspired by Hiroshige's print "Fireworks, Riogoku" in the series "One Hundred Views of Edo." It is described in Laurence Binyon's *Painting in the Far East* (London: Edward Arnold, 1908); I have found that most of the information about Oriental art in Stevens' journals and early letters is quoted or paraphrased from Binyon's book.
9. *Souvenirs and Prophecies*, p. 146, pp. 158-59; note too the reference to the Superman on p. 162.
10. George Bornstein (cf. note 2) has pointed out how the romanticism of Stevens' early poetry reappears, transformed, in his later work (pp. 164-75). Bornstein's argument, and my own concerning the "decreation" from which Stevens' poetic career began, are in accord with Stevens' comments in his *Letters*, p. 350, p. 352.
11. *Blindness and Insight* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 34-35.

Reviews

Wallace Stevens. By Frank Kermode, 1960; rpt. New York: Chip's Bookshop, 1979.

In 1960, Frank Kermode published in England **Wallace Stevens**, a short book intended in part to serve as a companion to **The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens** (1954). Nineteen years later, in honor of the poet's centennial and in honor of Kermode's contribution to the scholarship and criticism on Stevens, the book was reprinted with a three page Preface by the author in which he calls attention to his later writings that reflect his more current thinking on Stevens and in which he says: "if I were writing the book now I should sometimes express different views and alter my general emphasis, though I have not changed my opinion that he is among the greatest of twentieth-century poets." Too, in the Preface he admits to some "regrets" and corrects a "few mistakes" that are found in the book. (The reader of the Preface will note with humor that Kermode acknowledges his original misspellings of "Jarrell" and "Benamou" as "Jarell" and "Benamon" and manages to spell "Buttel" as "Buttell" and "Riddel" as "Riddell.")

Since the reader for whom this notice is written already knows the substance and impact of Kermode's study, and in respect to Kermode's accomplishment in 1960, I believe it inadvisable to subject the book to the detailed "revisited" approach; rather, I should like to offer a few observations. When the book first appeared, Kermode's perceptions of Stevens' central issues were fundamental to an understanding of the poetry, and they still are. Although his method involves interpreting and evaluating poems with regularity, Kermode never permits the reader to forget "the interlacing that binds the great early poems with the greater and different work of his old age," the "great meditations of his last years." In explaining Stevens to a then somewhat limited and selective audience, Kermode's own prose draws heavily but appropriately from the poetry and prose of Stevens. Here is an instance that, while gleaned rather arbitrarily, is nonetheless representative:

The theme of *A Primitive like an Orb* (CP, 440) is that possible "degree of perception at which what is real and what is imagined are one: a state of clairvoyant observation, accessible or possibly accessible to the poet or, say, the acutest poet." It is about "the essential poem at the centre of things" and the man, or the power, that makes it. This poem is what makes life good; but it is "a difficult apperception," delicate, achieved by such fleeting and intangible means. We know of it not directly but through "lesser poems."

Kermode's fondness for the adages, which is everywhere present in the book, is acknowledged directly in the chapter on Stevens' prose: "they are vital to any understanding of Stevens, and . . . as a collection of *obiter dicta* on poetry by a working poet, they are probably unmatched since Hopkins." In fact, Kermode is convinced that Stevens' prose must be considered seriously, for it assists the reader in coming to terms with the poetry and "is itself a kind of poetry." For poems judged highly successful by Kermode (e.g., "Sunday Morning," "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," "The Comedian as the Letter C," "The Idea of Order at Key West," "Credences of Summer"), he provides insightful explications. When he comes to *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, he declares: "I will not disgrace Stevens' greatest poem by plodding commentary. There is no metaphysical theme in *Notes* [In a footnote Kermode lists several discussions of the poem] that has not been discussed in relation to other poems, and the need is now to sense the immanence of such themes."

Since Kermode offered *Wallace Stevens* as a means by which Stevens' immense complexities and his overall designs might be better understood by English readers, scholars and critics have approached the Stevens canon with an intensity and vigor

that have helped to place the poet as one of the most important of the century. Most certainly, their work owes debts of discovery to this short book.

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Wallace Stevens: The Poet and His Critics. By Abbie F. Willard, Chicago: American Library Association, 1978.

A study like this can easily become redundant if it fails to grasp the essence of its subject and make possible, for those who come after it, new critical formulations. Measuring criticism's own velocities of change, a survey of secondary material can be a useful resource in itself, especially at a time when the proliferation of gloss threatens the primacy of text.

With Stevens, we seem to be circling about the poetry, seeking openings into obscurity, critical implements with which to comprehend the difficulty that still remains, even after sixty years of exegesis and probing. Willard's book, commendable as the most thoroughgoing and comprehensive review of its kind, nevertheless fails to provide us with these tools, or with any metacritical retrospective capable of contributing to a more fruitful interpretive enterprise.

This is a limited and captious book (Willard's terms are "selective and evaluative"), uninhibited in its repeatedly *ad hominem* arguments. We learn, for example, that one writer's limitations are

primarily noticeable in his sketchy explications and superficial examinations of theme or technique. When explicating a poem, he usually cites a few major critical approaches then expands the cumulative approach with perhaps one minor point. When he does add an original interpretation to an element in the poem he is most often inaccurate and imprecise because he is too simplistic in his associations to the symbols he attempts to explain (p. 41).

Even if it were true, and subject to proof, this estimate of a particular critical performance is singularly unhelpful as we try to come to terms with the roots of critical inadequacy; the literary, sociocultural, and historical factors that have to a large degree shaped the Stevens critical industry. Where has the legacy of New Criticism been misapplied? Where do the critics of consciousness, like J. Hillis Miller, stand in relation to the rhetorical analysts like Helen Vendler? And how does each really contribute to our understanding of Stevens? Is there any underlying connection between Stevens' hedonism as perceived by Winters, and the precision of expression revealed by Blackmur?

Questions like these ought to be answered, but they are never even raised, in a study that purports to be more than an annotated bibliography. The book cannot transcend mere taxonomy because it lacks a theoretical grounding, some cogent and supportive set of principles upon which selection and evaluation could profitably have been based.

The structure of the book rests, in fact, on a major and questionable presumption, namely that "a chronological review of the same criticism, except where noted, reveals no decisive trends in mass critical thinking" (p. xii). But the exceptions, after all, undermine this assumption, and Willard is forced, time and again, to take history and critical influence into account. Thus Riddel's *Clairvoyant Eye* (1965) is ranked above Morse's *Wallace Stevens* (1970) because it appeared first; Hi Simons is singled out for especial praise as a pioneer in the field, and so forth. Willard's own practice admits, correctly though inconsistently, that a critical study undertaken at a particular time must be judged with careful regard for its historical situation.

Having arranged her book thematically, Willard proceeds to group together

critical opinions and approaches that really ought to be treated separately. There is something patently unfair and uninstructional about comparing Richard Eberhart's 1947 views on Stevens' "oeuvre with minimal change" with those of John Enck (1964) or Richard Blessing (1970); Eberhart wrote before *The Auroras of Autumn* and *The Collected Poems* had ever appeared, and even, for that matter, before Stevens would write that "One poem proves another and the whole," in "A Primitive Like an Orb," 1948. It makes a difference, besides, that of the three critics here only Blessing could have known of Stevens' proposed title "The Whole of Harmonium," published in the *Letters* of 1966.

It might be convenient for the reader to see these views grouped together into one supposed approach, but a simple and ahistorical conflation can never suggest, as Willard might wish it could, "directions for future study." What we require is a sense of the development of this approach over the years, a chronicle of changing attitudes, that we might extend a fruitful line of inquiry into the future of Stevens criticism.

It seems, oddly enough, that Willard recognizes this necessity elsewhere, but not in her own work. She praises Joseph Riddel's "The Contours of Stevens Criticism" (1964) for pointing out, in chronological fashion, the general directions of Stevens studies, and calls *The Achievement of Wallace Stevens* (1962) the best of the critical anthologies partly because its editors "do identify a primary trend in the Stevens criticism when they note a change in concern from Stevens's principle theme, the relation of the imagination and reality, to a consideration of the later poetry itself" (p. 49). Of course trends exist in the contours of Stevens criticism, assertions to the contrary notwithstanding. But they cannot be observed, let alone explained, in a thematic arrangement.

The ahistorical treatment of Stevens criticism occasionally presses Willard into making a number of absurdly anachronistic statements: How can Daniel Fuchs, writing in 1967, have misunderstood a point made by Riddel in 1971? How could William Tindall (1961) "agree" with John Enck (1964) and William Burney (1968)? Other structural flaws detract from the usefulness of the book. Many works, for instance, do not fit into the broad categories described by Willard, and so at least eight full-length studies — books by Fuchs, Pack, Stern, Kessler, Nassar, Morris, Sukenick and Perlis—are relegated to a catchall chapter called "World View."

Because it happens to express a particular point of view very clearly, a rather slight article may be lent as much emphasis as a major study. The awkwardness and disproportion arising from these circumstances are compounded by the frequent necessity to reconsider certain commentaries in more than one chapter. Thus Hillis Miller's important "Wallace Stevens' Poetry of Being" is discussed four separate times in the book, under three different chapter headings.

The reader who lowers his expectations and seeks an annotated bibliography alone is likely to be less disappointed, for the assiduous labours that must have gone into compiling the material for this book are evident in its exhaustiveness. A few minor deficiencies nevertheless are annoying: the lack of a cumulative bibliographical list and a complete index of authors cited makes it difficult to locate certain studies without combing the text; for example, Sister Bernetta Quinn's influential "Metamorphosis" essay. Willard's practice of giving only the most recent date of an article's republication can mislead the reader into assuming, for instance, that Blackmur's "Examples of Wallace Stevens" was written in 1952 (rather than 1932). Misprints and other errors that might be more excusable in other sorts of critical works stand out in a reference guide: Will Vance's *Saturday Review* essay appeared in 1946, not 1964, and *The Palm at the End of the Mind* was published in 1971, not 1967.

The conclusion and implications of this book are more troubling than errors of proofreading, though. Attempting to make good her claim of suggesting directions for future study, Willard devotes a final chapter to "Own Work," in which she paraphrases reviews of *Opus Posthumous*, *The Necessary Angel* and the *Letters*, then offers a succession of lengthy excerpts from *Souvenirs and Prophecies* to somehow support her early contention that Stevens' prose writings themselves "should provide not an

end, but a direction for future critical analysis" (p. xiii).

Exactly how they do that is unfortunately never made quite clear, though a number of vague reasons are implied, mostly having to do with the poet's biography and his statements about poetry and art. If the structure of the book collapses at this point, we can react with some disappointment, but no real surprise. The thematic framework of the book has fulfilled itself, and can go nowhere beyond the limitations of its own categories.

We are left with the sense of having read a long series of book reviews, neatly but superficially gathered together under long-established rubrics — a series that would put an end to Stevens criticism, and not, as it should, encourage new beginnings.

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Fall 1980

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