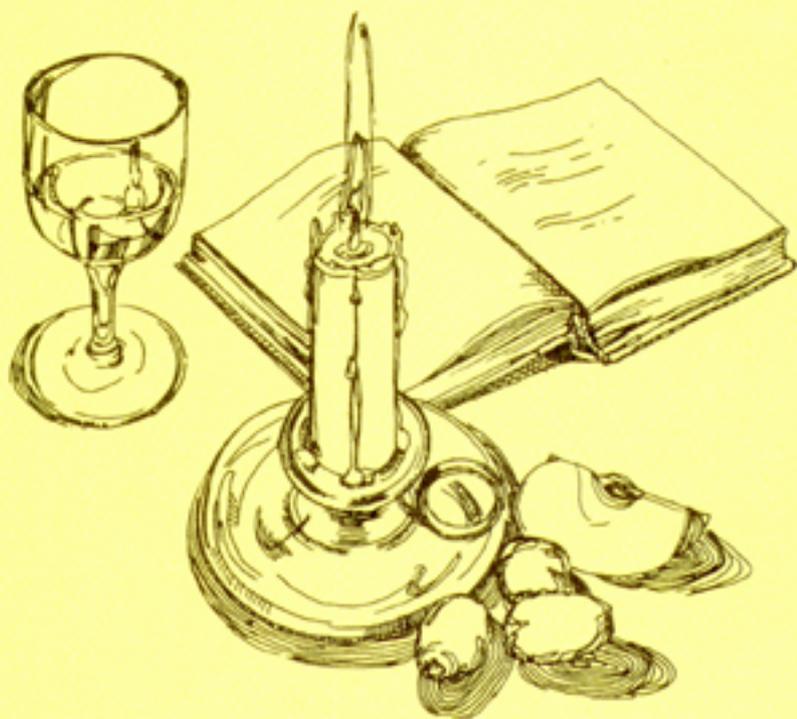


*The
Wallace
Stevens
Journal*



A Publication of The Wallace Stevens Society

Volume 5 Number 1/2

Spring 1981

Wallace Stevens

A Celebration

Edited by

**Frank Doggett and
Robert Buttel**

"Centennial programs marking the anniversary of Wallace Stevens' birth have proliferated across the United States, but none, perhaps, will have a worthier aftermath than the selection of essays by authorities on this giant among American poets which Princeton University Press has brought out under the intelligent editorship of Frank Doggett and Robert Buttel. . . . Readers of *Wallace Stevens, A Celebration* may well rejoice that for generations, the company of those mindful of 'supreme fiction' will find in its tributes . . . a record, as if in a cornerstone, of what Americans were finding in this magnificent poet one hundred years after his birth."

—*The Wallace Stevens Journal*

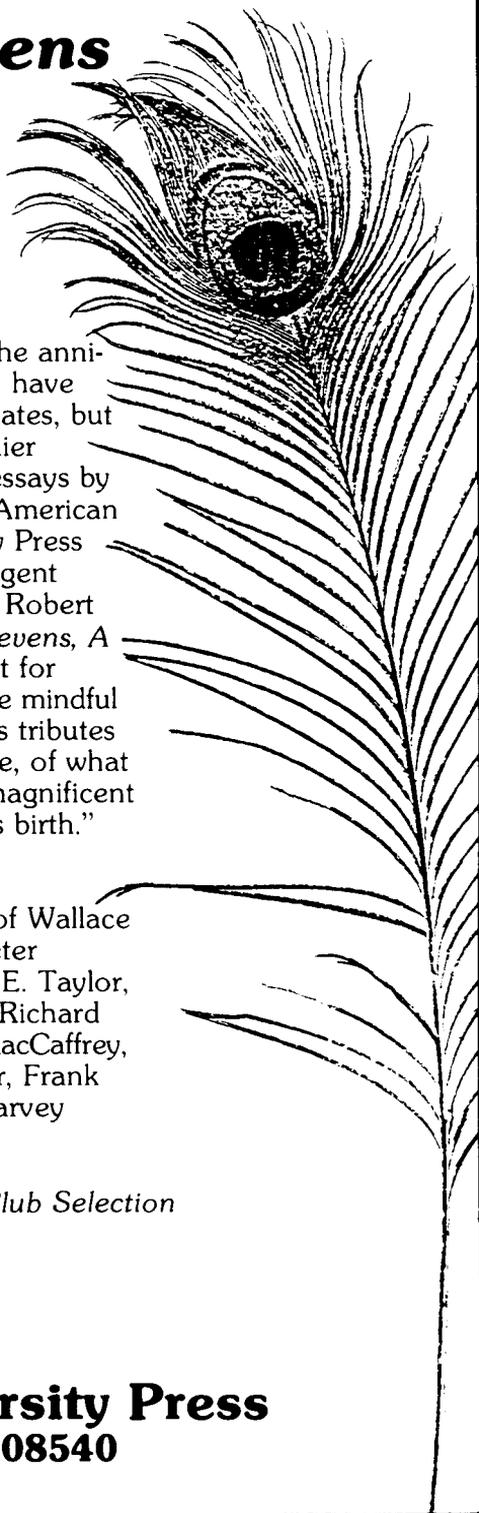
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The Wallace Stevens Journal

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Cover: by Faye A. Serio – "A candle is enough to light the world," from *The Man with the Blue Guitar*.

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Nothing That Is Not There

Safe under a red spread of light, the goat
looms lifelike on the paper, wondrously white.

In a dim room at four a.m. I am
invoking apparitions in asking a goat, ghostlike,

to come back to the second he stood, rapt, in the yard
by the wood and wire fence, looking away.

With standard incantations and packaged brew
I can perform this ritual in black-and-white,

recall the sight, and make the goat stand rapt again,
but small and flat now, not what I saw there, not at all.

The shadows have changed. The shades have been playing.
I think they must persistently rearrange,

for, try as I may, I never print the same past twice.

—Olivia Holmes

STEVENS' *TROMPE L'OEIL*: VISUAL COMEDY IN SOME SHORT POEMS

FRED MILLER ROBINSON

To my knowledge Stevens never mentioned, in his writings, *trompe l'oeil* art or the many American artists who practiced it. But he was deeply interested, particularly in his later years, in what he called, in his "Adagia," "The exquisite environment of fact" and the ideal of "the poem of fact in the language of fact" (OP 164). He realized, like any creator or observer of *trompe l'oeil* art, that the reproduction of such an environment, in the creation of such a poem, was an act requiring all the splendors and deceptions of artifice. As he says in "The Bouquet," "a real" is "made more acute by an unreal" (CP 451). In *trompe l'oeil* art, this paradox is posed by deceptions. Reality is so skillfully feigned that a conflict of messages results: both an impression of unmediated reality and a recognition of ingenious technique is conveyed by the eyes to the brain. The effect is one of astonishment (what the Italians called *stupori*) at the simultaneously real and unreal nature of the illusion. This conflict is not resolved, but continues to induce uncertainty and raise questions in the mind of the observer about the nature of artistic representation. For the *trompe l'oeil* artist, while seeming to reproduce reality slavishly, with objectivity and impartiality, actually intensifies reality beyond accepted conventions of illusion, to the point where one admires the very mastery of the artist that the painting seems to hide, if only for a moment. The interplay between reality and the feigning of reality in art is heightened and intensified. The delusions and deceptions of *trompe l'oeil* art dramatize by exposure the ordinary techniques of representation — most notably, perspective and the illusion of texture.¹

Speaking most particularly of *trompe l'oeil* still life, Alfred Frankenstein has noted that deception can be momentarily achieved if the artist selects subjects involving as little depth as possible. If depth is reduced, then the observing eye does not have to make the kinds of muscular adjustment that reality requires and that paintings do not.

Our perception of depth in nature depends on two types of experience. One is the constant adjustment and readjustment of the muscles of our eyes as we focus upon objects now near, now far, now in the middle ground. The other is binocular parallax, the phenomenon whereby, as one rides in a train, the landscape near at hand moves backward while the landscape at a distance moves in the opposite direction, but more slowly...If our eyes alone can be believed, the world around us contains nothing even slightly stable; it is perpetually reeling, collapsing, and moving off in all directions at once.²

Reality is perceived as unstable, but paintings are not because their objects "exist as shapes in the same plane...and the absence of these changes in focus

tell us, however subtly, that we are not confronted with natural reality.”³ In other words, to create the illusion of reality, the *trompe l'oeil* painter acknowledges and exploits the most unnatural aspect of painting: its flatness.

Stevens often liked to expose the relationship of reality and artifice through deceptions of the eye, through a kind of comic trickery involving a gay display of technique. Things seen as real become unreal, or imagined things spring into life, like the Pacific wave, held back throughout the poem by the Doctor of Geneva’s “simmering mind,” that suddenly springs in an “unburgherly apocalypse” and drenches him (CP 24). Stevens knew that the clash between “exquisite” and “fact” in the phrase, “the exquisite environment of fact,” had comic potential, as did the sudden but sly shift of focus between the two sentences that complete his adage: “The final poem will be the poem of fact in the language of fact. But it will be the poem of fact not realized before.” Facts are things made, too, and reality is not, as Stevens notes in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” a collection of stable objects in space (the view that habit presents to us), but “the life that is lived in the scene that it composes” (NA 25). A good example of a comic turn from a view of reality as something realized through a transparent art, to a view of reality as something realized through a gay and festive art, is the ninth section of “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” (CP 471-2).

Here the persona declares that “We keep coming back and coming back / To the real: to the hotel instead of the hymns / That fall upon it out of the wind. We seek / The poem of pure reality, untouched / By trope or deviation, straight to the word, / Straight to the transfixing object, to the object / At the exactest point at which it is itself, / Transfixing by being purely what it is.” In this way New Haven can be seen through an “eye made clear of uncertainty, with the sight / Of simple seeing...” But then, Stevens shifts abruptly from hotels to hymns, from objects to spirit, from discourse to celebration: “We seek / Nothing beyond reality” — and then, cunningly — “Within it, / Everything, the spirit’s alchemicana / Included, the spirit that goes roundabout / And through included, not merely the visible, / The solid, but the movable, the moment, / The coming on of feasts and the habits of saints, / The pattern of the heavens and high, night air.” Suddenly reality is anything but ordinary, it is transformed by all that it can include. Having looked up from the hotels to the “high, night air,” the persona then begins section X by declaring that “It is fatal in the moon and empty there,” acknowledging how unreal New Haven has become. The solid and visible “surfaces” of the city, as we think of them in the desire to reproduce them, without trope or deviation, in their pure reality, become “hallucinations,” are made “gay” by “This faithfulness of reality.” To be faithful to the reality of New Haven is to produce a festival of images. We are left with questions and contradictions and confusions; in section X the persona says, “We do not know what is real and what is not” because reality has become “a total double-thing.” But we have embarked on a “search,” a search that is this long and devious poem itself.

Shifts of perception from reality to artifice and back are often comic in Stevens’ poems and in *trompe l'oeil* art. Although you would never realize it

from reading art criticism, *trompe l'oeil* art is more often comic than not, and in its contradictions it always has the potential for comedy. When a fly is exquisitely rendered on the cuff of a portrait subject, or when the reverse side of a canvas is painted on the front side, or when the contents of a letter rack are painted in all their frayed and dog-eared disorder, or when hands or cucumbers (and even guns pointed at the observer) intrude into the observer's visual plane—in all these cases the comedy involves the clash between ingenuity and naturalism. The paintings say, in effect, I have deceived you, not simply into thinking I am real (that is at best a momentary, if astonishing, delusion), but into acknowledging that reality is a construction of the imagination, that what you see is only what you think you see, always.

One of the closest of Stevens' poems to the evocation of "pure reality" is "Study of Two Pears" (CP 196-7). This "study" is presided over by one of Stevens' favorite comic personae, the pedant. The subtle comedy of the poem, its deceiving nature, is brought out when the professorial quality of the voice is emphasized. We are presented, after all, with an academic title, verses numbered in Roman numerals, and a first line, "Opusculum paedagogum" — all of which suggest a lecturer, pointer in hand, discoursing on the two fruit in question. To stress this aspect of the poem is to stress the artificial and subjective cast to what purports to be an objective study of the pears in themselves. The pears are said to resemble nothing else, "not viols,/Nudes or bottles..." They are simply what they are, and are described in terms of their unquestionable color and form, their essential composition. Aware that, from our subjective vantages we cannot see them whole, the persona remarks helpfully that "They are not flat surfaces/Having curved outlines," but "are round/Tapering toward the top." This is nothing if not an objective study. But small encroachments on the anti-poetic begin to insinuate themselves by verse IV: "In the way they are modelled/There are bits of blue," he says (my stress), suggesting how much they do seem like *objets d'art*. Soon the colors of the pears (as you look close, studying them objectively), "various yellows,/Citrons, oranges and greens," are described as "Flowering over the skin" (my stress), a trope that suggests that resemblances are not being strictly outlawed. The persona concludes that "The pears are not seen/As the observer wills." This is both true and false. The pears are there, in their deliciously implacable reality, but in presenting us with a study of them, the professor has certainly willed himself (and us) to see them in a certain way. He has intensified them as assuredly as any Keats might have. In fact, the more objective he has tried to be, the more he has willed us to see them his way; their reality is framed by his "Opusculum paedagogum." His objectivity is a deception after all, and his conclusion the grandest deception. As in a *trompe l'oeil* painting, we behold the reality of the pears at the same time that we behold the presiding ingenuity of the artist (or lecturer) in so presenting them. This contradiction is the source of the poem's comic and conceptual life.

The pedant-persona appears again in "So-And-So Reclining on Her Couch" (CP 295-6), the funniest of Stevens' later poems. Here he performs a reversal of the *trompe l'oeil* effect: instead of reality revealed as artifice, an artifice

suddenly becomes real. We are made to regard a woman reclining before us in odalisquean splendor. The poem works most effectively if we imagine the persona lecturing on a real woman, posed before us: a model, to be studied as an *objet*. The comedy of the poem derives from the contradiction between our awareness of the woman's very real, sensual beauty, and the professor's attempt to make her a thing, an "it," a "mechanism" suitable for the purposes of his demonstration. Of course, we wouldn't be aware of her vital reality if the professor were not, but he is. In the midst of saying that this so-and-so is "completely anonymous," without a history, "Born, as she was, at twenty-one," he drops his donnish airs and, affected by her beauty, remarks that there is "only/The curving of her hip, as motionless gesture,/Eyes dripping blue, so much to learn." Then he returns to his demonstration: she is Projection A, the "thing" in itself. Projection B is the "invisible gesture" that presents her as Idea, suspending a crown in the air above her, the touch of the unreal. Projection C is "the contention, the flux/Between the thing as idea and/The idea as thing," in which she floats, half-thing, half-abstraction. This much is clear, and works very nicely so long as she remains a thing, a stable piece of the stable furniture of reality, available for projections. But the professor's lecture comes apart when he adds, quite reasonably, that "The arrangement contains the desire of/The artist." At the mention of desire his own unprofessional appreciation of her as a living woman seems to return, for he proceeds to undermine his lecture with these words: "But one confides in what has no/Concealed creator. One walks easily/The unpainted shore, accepts the world/As anything but sculpture." The reality of the world, as well as the reality of the woman, bears his Projections off, the abstractions of "the man/Of bronze whose mind was made up and who, therefore, died" (CP 472). His comments on the unpainted shore, which I like to think of as extemporaneous, indicate that he is still alive, still questioning, to his credit. He ends by addressing the woman directly, as a real and no longer anonymous person: "Good-bye,/Mrs. Pappadopoulos, and thanks." I like to imagine that she has already gotten off the couch (perhaps at the moment when he said, "This is the final Projection, C"), making her "motionless gesture" come alive, breaking the illusion of herself as solely a work of art. She is now, clearly, to the professor, "anything but sculpture," and his goodbye to her is a farewell to his lecture, his thanks is at once for her services as a model and, a little ruefully, a little appreciatively, for her real beauty. The poem involves deceptions of the eye expressed as comic contradictions. She is a painting, a thing, come alive for us, and the result is, not that the ideas in the lecture have been refuted, but that they have been kept from seeming conclusive, made anything but "final." In losing the conclusion of his lecture the professor has discovered his subject, walking out the door.

Stevens' deceptions are instances of his love of ingenuity, of display, in being able to conjure and dispel realities. We do well not to forget the comedy of his *tours de force*. In "The Bouquet" (CP 448-453), is the bouquet in question a real spray of flowers in a vase in a room, or the subject of a painting? Gombrich describes the successful *trompe l'oeil* as "the height of visual ambiguity,"⁴ and Stevens sustains this ambiguity in his dense elaboration of

the image. At first the bouquet is not described as a real object at all, but is declared simply to be "a growth/Of the reality of the eye, an artifice,/Nothing much..." But then, as the observer "enters, entering home,/The place of meta-men and para-things," and things become "transfixed, transpierced and well/Perceived," the bouquet becomes "true nothing": it is imbued with the potent eye and the emotions of the observer. In this place that one enters, the bouquet becomes at once more real and more unreal than it was when dismissed as ornament. In the three long, middle sections of the poem, we gather, slowly, factual information: the bouquet "stands on a table at a window/Of the land, on a checkered cover, red and white"; it is composed of red roses, blue delphiniums and "grassy flourishes" of larkspur and fern, and through the window one can see a white duck swimming on a lake. All this is offered in plain speech. At the same time the bouquet is an idea, a para-thing beheld by meta-men, a symbol, a souvenir, something "seen in insight," embellished, "quirked/And queered" by those who observe it. Because of this ambiguity, we cannot tell if it is a real thing transfixed by the eye into a work of art, or a painted thing brought alive by the sheer activity of an excited response to it. Stevens ends the middle section with these words:

The rudiments in the jar, farced, finikin,
Are flatly there, unversed except to be,
Made difficult by salt fragrance, intricate.
They are not splashings in a penumbra. They stand.
They are. The bouquet is a part of a dithering:
Cloud's gold, of a whole appearance that stands and is.

Is it "flatly there" because it is painted on a canvas, or should we take "flatly" to mean absolutely there, positively real? No matter, it stands as part of a whole: whether the center of the composition of the painting, or the center of whatever real things surround it. The bouquet is the center of the lines of force that the dynamic eye fastens on and moves along, "as if feathers of the duck/Fell openly from the air to reappear/In other shapes..." Whether reality or artifice, the bouquet has become, by the end of section IV, a "rapt" thing because observed raptly, a "thing intact," powerful and stable in its being there. The more it has been detailed, the more it has become a thing composed.

Then in the six quick lines of the last section, Stevens literally upends his *objet*:

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

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

Here Stevens has created what Gombrich would call a new "context of action," or new "conditions of illusion."⁵ We had entered "The place of meta-men and para-things," where the bouquet became a center of aesthetic contemplation. Now a soldier, from a larger and violent world outside, enters what now is decidedly a real room, pays no attention to the bouquet because he is looking for a person, and by inadvertently and unknowingly spilling it, destroys the illusion and the importance of the illusion. The bouquet becomes "Nothing much" again; detached from its position as the "central whole," it becomes, in the words of section II, "so much forlorn debris." Assuredly it no longer "stands." Just as we are assured of its ontological verity, it is destroyed by a larger verity. It is interesting and comical that "No one is there," since we certainly have been there, and have remained there to observe the soldier and the spilled bouquet. But in viewing the *objet* with the intensity one accords a painting, we have indeed become meta-men: more than real, no longer objects ourselves, there in the room, but eyes, intense but detached.

Stevens has led us into regarding the bouquet as the center of its and our world, and hence a stable thing, only to expose this deception by creating a whole new context in which the bouquet, now acknowledged as real, is trivial and peripheral. The room and the flowers suddenly leap to a larger life, if not a more intense one. With his ending, Stevens shows us, suddenly, astonishingly, that "the growth/Of the reality of the eye" can be a deception, a forgetting of a reality that does not acknowledge the observing or the contemplating eye. Or, on the other hand, since our eyes do observe the soldier and his actions, it *has* grown to include that reality for which the bouquet is a piece of decor.

It was easier for Stevens to develop this comedy of deception in the stretches of his long poems, in which he could play one section off against another, taking his time to evoke one illusion before dispelling it. In his shorter poems, Stevens turns them back on themselves, with a concluding irony that is comic enough to throw the argument into question, but not so deflating that a finality will seem to have been achieved. The ending of "Study of Two Pears" must be both true and false for us to see that the desire to be objective is a disposition of the subjective mind, honorable but foiled; that the lesson, like the lesson in "So-And-So Reclining on Her Couch," contains a truth within the limitations that contradict that truth; that a conflict of messages is conveyed. This is why, in the short poems, the final lines often contradict or stand in sharp contrast to, the title and/or the first lines: "So-And-So" becomes "Mrs. Pappadopoulos," a connoisseur of chaos becomes a pensive man with mystical visions (CP 215-16). Or, in the late poem, "What We See Is What We Think" (CP 459-60), the last line both overturns and supports the title.

"What We See Is What We Think" is a neglected and difficult poem, and I only want to give it a provisional reading. Here it is in full:

WHAT WE SEE IS WHAT WE THINK

At twelve, the disintegration of afternoon
Began, the return to phantomerei, if not

To phantoms. Till then, it had been the other way:

One imagined the violet trees but the trees stood green,
At twelve, as green as ever they would be.
The sky was blue beyond the vaultiest phrase.

Twelve meant as much as: the end of normal time,
Straight up, an élan without harrowing,
The imprescriptible zenith, free of harangue,

Twelve and the first gray second after, a kind
Of violet gray, a green violet, a thread
To weave a shadow's leg or sleeve, a scrawl

On the pedestal, an ambitious page dog-eared
At the upper right, a pyramid with one side
Like a spectral cut in its perception, a tilt

And its tawny caricature and tawny life,
Another thought, the paramount ado...
Since what we think is never what we see.

Our initial reaction to the title is to take it as meaning that our thinking is based on the material provided to us by our seeing. But it can also mean that we only see what we think. This ambiguity is developed in the poem. We are presented with a sort of geometry of the day, a day as a shadow moving on a sundial, or seconds ticked off a clockface. What Bergson would call the duration of the day is represented as a succession of states (e.g., seconds). The poem begins, "At twelve, the disintegration of afternoon/Began," but this is a thought that cannot be based on perception. The zenith occurs, but not as a point on an arc. Yet so it seems if we imagine the day abstractly, as movement on a sundial or clock, or as a spectrum of color. At twelve it is absolutely green in the trees, but "one gray second after" the color becomes "a kind/Of violet gray, a green violet," a gradual shading into the "violet trees" of evening. The reason one can imagine this second-by-second transformation is that one has, from memory, conceptualized the day as a whole: hence, before noon, "One imagined the violet trees" even as they "stood green." So the day has become an action of the mind, and the very thought of the coming of shadows, the harrowing and haranguing of the absolute zenith, unleashes a series of apposite metaphors describing the process. These thoughts are as full of phantasm as the afternoon is full of shadows. If you dog-ear a page and hold it under a light, shadows will form under its tilt. Indeed, as the shadows lengthen when you move the page or the light, a pyramid is presented to the mind, one side of which is the dog-ear, the other sides of which are shadowy illusions, tawny caricatures of the one real side yet with a life of their own as the mind imagines an object of volume, a pyramid with two sides in shadow. Even this imagined

thing will change as the light changes, creating "another thought," a collection of phantoms.

With shadows come phantomerei, and reality is full of the motion of shadows. Reality is both real and unreal, so long as it is perceived. "Things seen are things as seen," Stevens noted in his "Adagia" (OP 162). We are deceived by specters and spectra, and by our memory. Our thoughts change as the light changes, in a "paramount ado," a sequence of ideas superior to things. Hence "what we think is never what we see." This contradicts the title comically: the initial and confident assertion that thinking is based on seeing is undermined, because the act of seeing is itself problematical. And yet if we take the title to mean that seeing is based on thinking, then the final line corroborates the idea that thinking absorbs things, that the life of reality is only set in motion by thought. The poem offers us an array of possibilities about the relation of the imagination and reality. Reality is a trick of the eye: this is Stevens' ultimate *trompe l'oeil*.

University of Massachusetts, Amherst

NOTES

1. See Marie-Louise d'Otrange Mastai, *Illusion in Art: trompe l'oeil: a History of Pictorial Illusionism* (New York: Abaris Books, 1975), and Martin Battersby, *Trompe l'oeil = The Eye Deceived* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1974).
2. Alfred Frankenstein, *The Reality of Appearance: The Trompe l'oeil Tradition in American Painting* (New York: New York Graphic Society Ltd., 1970), pp. 6-7.
3. Frankenstein, p. 7.
4. E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 276.
5. Gombrich, p. 206.

"KNOWLEDGE ON THE EDGES OF OBLIVION": STEVENS' LATE POEMS

ROBERT BUTTEL

Toward the end of the "Apology" Socrates says, "The state of death is one of two things: either the dead man wholly ceases to be and loses all consciousness or, as we are told, it is a change and migration of the soul to another place." These two alternatives represent the ends of the spectrum of the varieties of Stevens' eschatological experience. One can trace a sometimes uneasy course of fascination throughout his poetry as he attempted again and again to come to terms with the issue of mortality, beginning with his solacing conversion of death into a surrogate mythical figure, the "mother of beauty," or, through a tour de force of bizarre comic energy and mordant irony, into the ordinary woman whose horny feet "come/To show how cold she is, and dumb." In "The Death of a Soldier," of course, Stevens drops the strategy of witty and ironic displacement evident in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" and with a tone of reverent stoicism considers a "dead man [who has] wholly [ceased] to be": "Death is absolute and without memorial" and "The clouds go, nevertheless,/In their direction." Much later, the poem "Flyer's Fall" – surely this short prayerful utterance must carry over from a reading by Stevens of Yeats' "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" – reflects a longing, expressed in an intense paradox, for a "migration of the soul to another place," that "dimension in which/We believe without belief, beyond belief." Coming to terms with mortality in his poetry meant that Stevens had to achieve an extremely subtle adjustment of tone, style, and rhetoric in order not to evade or falsify the consequences of that engagement. As he approached his own end, fluctuating in his explorations between the alternatives stated by Socrates, the testing became all the more intensive. This meant, in turn, new awarenesses within the continuity of his concern with mortality as well as a continuing attempt to get the poetry right. In light of these comments, I want to consider briefly several of the poems he wrote at the close of his career.

"The Owl in the Sarcophagus," for example, illustrates a yearning to populate the "space of after-death," the nothingness, with archetypal beings, "death's own supremest images,/The pure perfections of parental space": "high peace," "high sleep," and "she that says/Good-by in the darkness," "in the syllable between life/And death." She is "the mother of us all,/The earthly mother and the mother of/The dead," a divinity of the threshold, that is, mediating the transition between the two realms, a numinous presence who "moved/With a sad splendor, beyond artifice,/Impassioned by the knowledge that she had,/There on the edges of oblivion." At the end of the poem, however, Stevens collapses this "mythology of modern death," as he calls it. The three figures, he declares, are "beings of the mind," "monsters of elegy, – /...of pity made," but they indicate, nevertheless, the desire for a migration of the soul to another place, as well as for the solace of myth. The

poem does have something of artifice about it, which the confession of mythic fabrication doesn't entirely erase. Compelling as the poem is in its articulation of some of Stevens' most subtle thoughts on the juncture of life and death, the allegorical framework tends to detract from the subtlety. Also, this framework is draped at times with a Symbolist gorgeousness of language, as in the description of peace "Adorned with cryptic stones and sliding shines." At times the style of the poem itself seems adorned.

Even a poem of utter desolation and oblivion, "Madame La Fleurie," moves in the direction of aesthetic overdetermination. In this case, another, but this time malevolent "mother of us all, /The earthly mother and the mother of /The dead" appears to be a Flora transposed into a horrifying version of Persephone whose particular cruelty is to devour what she has given, including the desperate knowledge gained from earth's "handbook of heartbreak." The grief of the persona "is that his mother should feed on him, himself and what he saw, /In that distant chamber, a bearded queen, wicked in her dead light." The irony is that even this dread final knowledge will be devoured by this grotesque agent of "sure obliteration," in the phrase from "Sunday Morning." The consoling mother of beauty in that poem has been transfigured radically. This "bearded queen" bears comparison with those *femmes fatales* to whom Frank Kermode has given the term Romantic Image. In any event, the image of Madame La Fleurie produces a lurid aesthetic thrill. In concept and in some of its details, this is a moving poem, but there is also something strident or melodramatic about it. The funereal diction and imagery in "The black fugatos are strumming the blacknesses of black.../The thick strings stutter the final gutturals" strike me as heavily theatrical and mannered, calling attention to themselves.

"Of Mere Being," however, is a poem of remarkable equipoise. The bird that sings in the palm at the end of the mind is also a kind of Romantic Image, an awesome *rara avis*, both alluring and forbidding. Singing beyond the last thought, "without human meaning, /Without human feeling, a foreign song," it is remote, in another dimension, yet inextricably there, as its "fire-fangled feathers dangle down." This image is gaudy enough and the language and prosody certainly dazzling, to the point at which one might well say they call attention to themselves. Yet I believe they become part of the complex meaning and haunting effect of this poem, making "Madame La Fleurie" seem overstated and almost sentimental by comparison. The bird as I see it is, like the bearded queen, an icon of the ultimate mystery of what lies beyond, caught in the last reach of the imagination and realized in an aesthetic symbol—the adjective "gold-feathered" suggesting its artifice and splendor. And the palm, around which hover slight biblical associations and connotations of victory, contributes a sense of exaltation. Although the bird and the tree in that "bronze decor" are otherworldly, tantalizingly elusive, sublimely unattainable, the image of "The wind [moving] slowly in the branches" lends an eerie palpability to the image at the edge of thought, beyond which lies the unknown, and at the same time helps to produce feelings of separation and loss—an exquisite pathos. It is this complex state of

awareness and feeling which accentuates a consciousness of *being*, "acutest at its vanishing," to use the phrase from "The Idea of Order at Key West." The word mere in the title is an ironic understatement on the one hand and, on the other, a stressing of the idea of fullness: that's all it is, and it's all that, nothing but. To be alive and human is to be ambiguously unhappy-happy, able to conceive an inhuman perfection we can never achieve, divorced from complete knowing, and facing oblivion. Yet there's a plangent splendor in how far our minds can reach, and this is epitomized in the uncanny beauty of the bird: a poetic realization of human desire, of yearning for transcendence. At the same time, the poem renders all the ambivalence of human *being*. Ambivalence and realization are the key terms, pointing to two very perceptive ways of considering Stevens' last poems.

Betty Buchsbaum, in her article "Wallace Stevens: The Wisdom of the Body in Old Age" in *The Southern Review* (Fall, 1979), refers, for example, to the "ambivalent human spirit" experiencing "what is without 'human meaning' somewhere 'beyond the last thought' to the extent that this is possible when one *has* the human feeling of a particular being." She says also that Stevens "discovers, and rehearses, in his late poems, the power and meaning that lie not in consummation or completion, but in being-on-the-edge of *any* completion." Fred Miller Robinson, in his article "Poems that Took the Place of Mountains: Realization in Stevens and Cézanne" in *The Centennial Review* (Summer, 1978), concentrates on the problem shared by the American poet and the French painter, that of *realizing* nature in art. He says that in Stevens "the poise between regarding the struggle to realize nature as *itself* a realization to be celebrated, and regarding the struggle as futile and incomplete, becomes particularly sharp and graceful." And he asks in reference to the grandeur in "To an Old Philosopher in Rome," "When can such grandeur be realized, when can the real and the thought of the real be conjoined except on the threshold of death?" One can see how these two articles come to points of consensus by placing beside this question Betty Buchsbaum's comment about the same poem: that when "both worlds flow together into a whole, never does *this* life exert a stronger, more vivid hold...; never does the unknown possess a clearer, more compelling music." With her emphasis on the psychological, archetypal, and ontological (with references to such writers as Jung, Erikson, and Tillich) and Fred Robinson's on the aesthetic and perceptual, these two articles nicely complement each other. Indeed, "Of Mere Being" is a perfect fusion of all that is implied by both approaches, as I hope my analysis of the poem suggests.

A poem that illustrates just how profound Stevens' desire was to dissolve the border between knowledge of earth and knowledge of the beyond and how his consciousness, as he contemplated that border with his own end approaching, became almost preternaturally acute is "The River of Rivers in Connecticut." The mysterious river of rivers in this poem is a paradoxically unseen manifestation of the universal force that pervades all phenomena, cosmic, natural, and human – it is like the "force that traverses a shade" at the end of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." Joining in its seamless flow both life and death, it reflects both: it "is a gayety, /Flashing and flashing in the sun," assuming here a

brilliant and lively physicality in one of "the appearances/That tell of it," and it "is fateful," ominously powerful, a disembodied "propelling force" against which no ferryman could bend. Sharing a magical intangibility with light and air, it is universal as well as local, an abstraction but a "vigor." As a "curriculum" it is the form for the actual course of things. Curriculum is a nicely chosen word since its Latin root, meaning to run, adds a sense of direction and purpose to this river that, nevertheless, "flows nowhere." It extends from mythic Stygia through our earthly habitation and beyond. In its influence the ordinary towns take on a celestial radiance: "The steeple at Farmington/Stands glistening and Haddam shines and sways." "Space-filled, reflecting the seasons, the folk-lore/Of each of the senses," the river suggests a timelessness that informs the cyclical and a mythic dimension of plenitude. In its spell immediate sense response finds its correlative in the continuity of folk-lore, thus transcending the temporal. As the river flows nowhere, it is "like a sea," vast, inscrutable, the source of both life and death. The poem itself encompasses mingled feelings of awe, foreboding, fulfillment, and the mystical. One feels at once the preciousness of life and the impending mystery of death; they merge in a continuum. Or as Betty Buchsbaum says, "both worlds flow together into a whole." All of this is accomplished with such control, with the firmness and certainty of the sentences declaring the paradoxical fusion of the this-worldly and the other-worldly culminating in the final marveling imperatives—"Call it, once more"; "call it, again and again"—that at first one might miss the full power of this poem.

It is difficult to imagine Stevens pushing further in this direction, though, of course, he continued to search out "the human end in the spirit's greatest reach,/The extreme of the known in the presence of the extreme/Of the unknown," as he puts it in "To an Old Philosopher in Rome." But in a good number of poems he reaches less urgently for the beyond and focuses his attention on this world and its possibilities, not that this tendency means a radical shift in theme. It does not mean, however, some differences in style and tone. Perhaps "Prologues to What is Possible" will help me explain; for my purpose here it is a pivotal poem. In it the persona-voyager has, in a metaphorical journey that takes on a strange actuality as it is described, traveled "beyond the familiar," feeling a part of "the far-foreign departure of his vessel" and "of the speculum of fire on its prow." To reach his destination would be like entering into the heart of some mystical meaning, "a point of central arrival," in which the boat would be shattered. Such an experience would be akin to the instant extinction and apotheosis that Oedipus underwent at the end, at Colonus. Certainly the persona would be divorced from earth and humanity, "Removed," as the poem says, "from any shore, from any man or woman, and needing none." Neither he nor the metaphor can arrive there, however, but even the conception leads to an awareness of potential new selves "as his attentions spread." With his perception enhanced, the phenomenal world opens to him with intense clarity as though the imaginative approach to a transcendent knowledge now added its revealing "puissant flick"—"The way some first thing coming into Northern trees/Adds to them

the whole vocabulary of the South,/The way the earliest single light in the evening sky, in spring,/Creates a fresh universe out of nothingness by adding itself,/The way a look or a touch reveals its unexpected magnitudes." The poignance, the sense of renewal, and the consequent elevation that arise are typical of those occasions when Stevens' focus returns to the real.

"Lebensweisheitspielerei" reduces the range of "what is possible," however, to a "dwindled sphere." This short poem brings the issue of life in relation to death to a point of harsh economy. Here, quiet resignation to the diminishment and impoverishment is balanced by the stoical intensity of human feeling made all the more precious by the narrowing down of possibility. One thinks of Achilles in the underworld telling Odysseus that he would treasure the most wretched of existences if only he were to be granted life again. What emerges in this poem, then, is an austere, unaccommodated nobility. The tenderness—"Each person completely touches us/With what he is and as he is"—is fully earned and authentic. Still, the effect of the poem depends on the fine balances between futility and fulfillment, banality and grandeur, pathos and muted exhilaration which are caught in the final line: "In the stale grandeur of annihilation," with the accumulating a, l, and n sounds, along with the oxymoron "stale grandeur" itself, helping to fuse, or hold in tension, these opposites. The culminating word annihilation evokes a quiet awe, and the whole line is tinged with a heroic sensation arising from the taut control of emotion in the face of such overwhelming personal obliteration—the self extinguished in total ruin. This poem is in a lineage with the *Harmonium* poem "The Death of a Soldier," with its understated nobility and stoicism, but the difference, of course, is that the late poem is much more personal and intimate in tone. Several others among the late poems place an emphasis on the word touch, as well as on look or speech. We recall the final line of "Prologues to What Is Possible," for example: "The way a look or a touch reveals its unexpected magnitudes." What is revealed also in these poems is a less guarded expression of human emotion. "Prologues to What Is Possible" raises this question: "What self...did he contain that had not yet been loosed...[?]" One of Stevens' selves released in these poems is a more overtly human self. And it is this self that lends an authority to the valedictory and venerable tone that pervades many of the last poems.

Out of the acceptance of a narrowing down of possibilities comes the discovery of those unexpected magnitudes—the "scrawny cry" in "Not Ideas about the Thing But the Thing Itself," for instance. In those poems in which Stevens does not strive so much to reach beyond, in which he is pulled back to the possibilities of earth, there is a corresponding style of more limited means out of which come sudden illuminations or epiphanies. Many of the titles themselves suggest ordinary, matter-of-fact activities or points of view: "The Plain Sense of Things," "Looking across the Fields and Watching the Birds Fly," "On the Way to the Bus," "An Old Man Asleep," or "A Quiet Normal Life." In the last one it is while the persona sat meditatively, "Here in his house and in his room,/In his chair," that "his actual candle blazed with artifice." Often one discovers in these poems a wonderful sense of incipience and either actual or

potential delight. "Long and Sluggish Lines" is a case in point. In it the lines are in accord with the title, matching the mood of futility and resignation at the outset. Nevertheless, a precious new knowledge of reality emerges irrepressibly and breaks through the indifference of old age as nature captures the speaker's attention and he begins to examine it imaginatively, interpreting it through the agency of personification. Apprehending nature in terms of the little drama he spontaneously creates, he becomes more fully alive himself in response to the effect of the "yellow patch, the side/Of a house" in the actual scene observed and anticipates with comic delight images of earliest spring. How well "escent" and "issant" render the notion of the inceptive and diminutive and at the same time give the effect of suppressed laughter erupting, escaping inarticulately, as the speaker's lugubrious tragic mood dissolves into a fresh apprehension of nature's oncoming change. This may be a premature act of the mind, but it prepares for a rebirth of self. The speaker turns sober and stern in the final four lines: the wanderer in life must await the arrival of actual spring before he can reach a full accord with reality, the "blissful liaison" Crispin sought in "The Comedian as the Letter C." Now, however, the search goes on in the context of a more open, human, and vulnerable tone. Although the speaker says that "The life of the poem in the mind has not yet begun," we have the poem itself, charged with the life that Stevens' act of the mind has found fit words for. It is a brilliant and moving cry of its particular occasion.

What makes these last poems so exhilarating is that against the looming presence of the end he kept discovering new selves as he discovered unexpected magnitudes and new knowledges of reality. How alive Stevens is in these poems as he pushes beyond the border of death or accepts its finality or probes for some continuum between life and death, and as he takes corresponding aesthetic chances, generating poems of quiet power and intensity right up to the end, his mind, indeed his whole being, engaged in the making of these poems that were also "makings of his self" and "no less makings of the sun" ("The Planet on the Table").

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STEVENS AND STEPHENS: A POSSIBLE SOURCE

RAJEEV PATKE

It does not appear to have been noticed that there are substantive correspondences between three of Stevens' poems and a work of travel-literature which he is known to have possessed: John L. Stephens' *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1841-43).¹ The correspondences do not prove conclusively that Stevens had read the work, and that details from it, subliminally retained, surface transmuted in the three poems—but they make such an hypothesis seem tenable enough to make the evidence worth presenting. The poems in question range from 1916 to 1942; and if the year in which Stevens acquired his copy could be established, the hypothesis would be either reinforced or controverted.

(A) The first instance of congruence concerns the memorable depiction of the "lasting visage" in section III, "It Must Give Pleasure," of *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*:

A lasting visage in a lasting bush,
A face of stone in an unending ear,
Red-emerald, red-slitted-blue, a face of slate,

An ancient forehead hung with heavy hair,
The channel slots of rain, the red-rose-red
And weathered and the ruby-water-worn,

The vines around the throat, the shapeless lips,
The frown like serpents basking on the brow,
The spent feeling leaving nothing of itself,

Red-in-red repetitions never going
Away, a little rusty, a little rouged,
A little roughened and ruder, a crown

The eye could not escape, a red renown
Blowing itself upon the tedious ear.
An effulgence faded, dull cornelian

Too venerably used....

(CP 400)

Some of the details in Stevens' canto may have found their origin in Stephens' description of the remains of a stone likeness found among many others in the

ruins of ancient Copán, and sketched by the accompanying artist, Mr. Catherwood (see Fig. 3):

Among the fragments lying on the ground near this place, is a remarkable portrait, of which the following engraving is a representation. It is probably the portrait of some king, chieftain, or sage. *The mouth is injured, and also part of the ornament over the wreath that crowns the head. The expression is noble and severe, and the whole character shows a close imitation of nature.... Originally it was painted, the marks of red color being still distinctly visible....* The fallen part was completely bound to the earth by vines and creepers, and before it could be drawn, it was necessary to unlace them and tear the fibres out of the crevices. *The paint is very perfect and has preserved the stone, which makes it more to be regretted that it is broken.*

(I.136-155, italics added)

There are no vines around the throat of the engraving and the forehead is not "hung with heavy hair," but Stephens' "wreath" is very like Stevens' "serpents basking on the brow." The vine which had to be torn out of earth and stone could have got transposed from other descriptions (an illustration in vol. II, facing page 338, depicts a large vine wreathed around a tree in front of some ruins). For the rest, the severe expression, the dilapidation (especially "the shapeless lips"), and the faded red colour are common to both. Stephens' comment that the paint had preserved the stone offers a gloss on the significance of the colour-references in "A lasting visage." The numerous other "idols" represented in Stephens could aptly be regarded as "an effulgence faded": the figures are vastly more ornate and ornamented (see Fig. 10) than the visage Stevens seems to have drawn on primarily.

(B) A second instance of congruence may be found in the disentanglement of Badroulbador in "The Worms at Heaven's Gate":

Here is an eye. And here are, one by one,
The lashes of that eye and its white lid.
Here is the cheek on which that lid declined,
And, finger after finger, here, the hand,
The genius of that cheek. Here are the lips,
The bundle of the body and the feet.

(CP 49-50)

This description may have cannibalized the more straightforwardly archeological resurrection at Copán:

Francisco found *the feet and legs* of a statue and Bruno a part of the body to match, and the effect was electric upon both. They searched and raked up the ground with their machetes till they found *the shoulders*, and then they set up the entire statue except for the head. They were both eager for



Fig. 3 Portrait at Copán

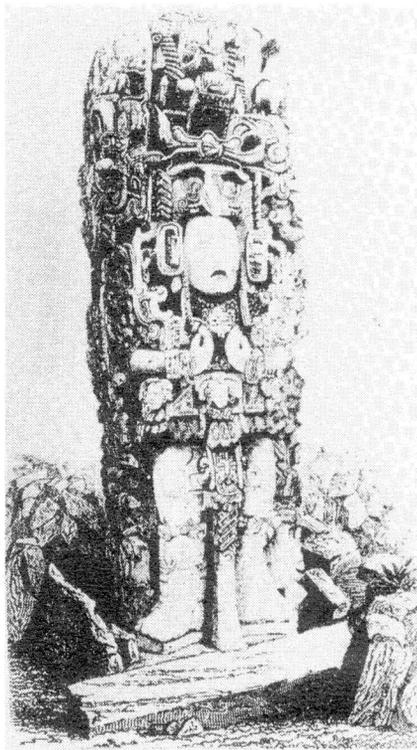


Fig. 10 Stone Idol

the possession of instruments with which to dig and find this remaining fragment...I leaned over with breathless anxiety while the Indians worked, and *an eye, an ear, a foot, or a hand was disentombed*; and when the machete rang against the chiseled stone, I pushed the Indians away and cleared out the loose earth with my hands.

(I. 119-120, italics added)

Stephens' tone is relatively uncomplicated: the excitement he conveys is infectious, the sentiments unsurprising. Although the sentiments evinced by the worms in Stevens' poem are less apposite (thus creating the ironic manner), the recovery of parts of what was once a whole is strikingly similar to both. The finical care of archaeological recovery (although not conspicuous in Stephens) is bound to create a distinctive effect if transferred from stone to flesh, as in Stevens. In transposition, the tone accentuates the irony both of Badroulbador's piecemeal disinterment and of her solemnly mortuary processional.

(C) The final set of correspondences is of a more tenuous sort. Hence the case for a connection between Stephens and Stevens must rest as much on the cumulative weight of all the evidence as on the parallels adduced below. These concern that poem of Stevens in whose writing he was most likely to consult a work of travel-literature: "The Comedian as the Letter C." Its narrative framework (exceptional in Stevens) and Crispin's itinerary first led me to examine Stephens. There are numerous descriptions of exotic landscape, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, storms of the sort one might expect ["all the evening peals of thunder crashed over our heads, lightning illuminated the dark forest and flashed through the open hut, the rain fell in torrents..." (I. 114)]. But Stevens seems to have had rather less use for local colour than one might have expected. The exception (apart from Crispin's travails on mule-back and Stephens' in one of numerous such occasions)² is the following passage, excised from "The Comedian as the Letter C," but found in the early version of the poem which was submitted for a competition in December 1921, and subsequently believed to have been lost until 1974, when a typescript was acquired by Yale University:

Virgins on Volcan del Fuego wear
That Volcan in their bosoms as they wear
Its nibs upon their fingers. They adorn
Their weavings with its iridescent (*sic*) threads.
They shut its fury in each bangle-blaze.

("From the Journal of Crispin")³

Stephens refers several times to "the great volcanoes of Agua and Fuego" (I. 208; also 252, 266). While the former is referred to as "volcano de Agua" (I. 227, 278), the latter is spelt "volcan del Fuego" (I. 284), the form Stevens uses. Preceding a description of a Fuego eruption (I. 284) Stephens gives an account of a village procession in honour of the local patron-saint; the women partici-

pating in this are described as wearing red cords twisted in their hair (I. 254) and red head-dresses (I. 261). Clearly, Stevens is creating a cento of associations round the colour red. The "nibs" upon the "virgin's" fingers would ordinarily imply some sort of nail-varnish. In the light of a lugubrious comment by Stephens on the smoking habits of the women of Central America, it seems more probable that Stevens was alluding ironically and in the form of a conceit to the aptness with which ladies dressed in red (fiery volcanoes) are attended upon by gallants who light their cigarettes for them in the extravagant hope of striking amatory sparks:

I am sorry to say that generally the ladies of Central America smoke...and one of the offices of gallantry is to strike a light; by doing it well, he may help to kindle a flame in a lady's heart. I have recollections of beauteous lips profaned. Nevertheless, even in this I have seen a lady show her prettiness and refinement, barely touching the straw to her lips as it were kissing it gently and taking it away.

(I. 256)

In general, though, Stevens' method of fleshing out the geography of Crispin's voyage, especially in the revised final text of *Harmonium* (1923), is verbal, stressing the allegorical rather than the topographical intent behind the environments provided for Crispin. This emphasizes parallels of an unexpected sort: concerning the letter C, and its sounds. It is well known from Stevens' letters (L 26, 294, 351-52, and 777) that he could very well have developed his interest in exploiting the possibilities of C-sounds entirely independent of Stephens. Hence the following parallels are adduced only as a possible reinforcement:

- (i) Stephens' accompanying friend, Mr. Catherwood, artist and "experienced traveller" (I. 9-10), is frequently referred to throughout vol. I and through most of vol. II simply as Mr. C.
- (ii) Proper names beginning with C predominate. Apart from the single or occasional appearances—Mr. Coffin (I.11), Senor Comyano (I. 13), the Canonigo Castillo (I. 49), Cholula (I. 97), Carvallo, Carlos Salazar (I. 242)—there are frequent references to characters who figure prominently in either or both volumes: Don Clementino (I. Chp. VIII), Comotan (passim), Copán (passim, esp. vol. I), General Cascara (passim), Carrera (passim, esp. vol. II).
- (iii) Stephens occasionally lapses into an alliterative jingle on the sounds of C, which, although far removed from Stevens' "ubiquitous concussion, slap and sigh" (CP 28) and "Exchequering from piebald fiscs unkeyed" (CP 43),⁴ is prolonged enough to be noticeable:

The cacique of Copán, whose name was Copán Calel, had been active in exciting the revolt and assisting the insurgents.

(I. 99-100)

Mr. Catherwood, who crossed on a clear day, says that the view from the top, both ways, was the most magnificent he saw in the country. Descending, the clouds were lifted...

(I. 166)

...along the whole coast from Campeachy to Cape Catoche, there is not a single stream or spring of fresh water.

(II. 404)

(iv) The diction in Stevens is always remarkable, often concinnous; in "The Comedian" it is markedly outlandish. Words like "sierra," "balustrade," "coxcomb," and "pronunciamento" occur both in Stephens and Stevens, but are common enough for this to be unremarkable in itself. But other, less familiar words, some of Spanish-Mexican and Latin American origin and connotations, also occur in both: "cabildo" (I. 79; II. 168, 269, 271 and CP 32); "caparison" (I. 64 and CP 30); and "alguazil" (I. 254 & passim and "The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws," CP 87). Stevens' references to his habitual use of dictionaries (L 674, 698-99, 764) indicate that he would look up unusual words *after* he had used them in his verse. Hence his reading must have been his principal source for augmenting his vocabulary. Stephens could have served as one such source.

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NOTES

1. J.M. Edelstein reports that Stevens' copy was sold in 1957: "The Poet as Reader: Wallace Stevens and His Books," *The Book Collector*, 23:i (Spring 1974), 65. See also the Parke-Bernet Galleries Sale Catalogue No. 1895, lot 447, p 96. [Editor's note: John L. Stephens' *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan* has been reprinted in one volume by Rutgers University Press, 1949. Figures 3 and 10 have been reproduced from this source with permission.]
2. See Stephens, II. 275-276, and "From the Journal of Crispin," *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, ed. Frank Doggett and Robert Buttel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 36.
3. Doggett and Buttel, p. 42.
4. This line provides another instance of how Stevens' reading may have contributed to his verse. See Carol Flake, "Stevens' 'The Comedian as the Letter C,' Section V, Conclusion," *The Explicator*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (1971), item 26.

TWO VIEWS OF TERRA INFIDEL: "SUNDAY MORNING" & *ESTHÉTIQUE DU MAL*

DORIS L. EDER

. . . now both heaven and hell
Are one, and here, O terra infidel.

There are striking resemblances between Stevens' poems "Sunday Morning," which dates from 1915, and *Esthétique du Mal*, written in 1944. Both are meditative poems of considerable stature and grandeur illustrating Stevens' belief that poetry "must take the place/Of empty heaven and its hymns."¹ "Sunday Morning," which I would still single out as the greatest poem of the earth written during this century, affirms and celebrates earth as the only paradise. In the poem a hardwon joy in eternal recurrence replaces the longing for "imperishable bliss." *Esthétique du Mal* considers the ineluctable nature of pain and evil in this, our paradise. It too casts off the "sleek ensoulings" of religion and all such false engagements of the mind, finding the health of the world sufficient to withstand pain and suffering. Written thirty years after "Sunday Morning," *Esthétique* is a less lyrical, more irregular, heterogeneous, and difficult – indeed, obscure – poem than "Sunday Morning."

Each poem opens on a scene of luxuriant splendor with one of Stevens' curiously marionette-like figures musing beside the sea. The complacent woman of "Sunday Morning" is a muse figure, whose pleasant, comfortable surroundings dissipate at the same time as they give rise to thoughts of mortality and the attendant yearning for "imperishable bliss." In the ease of Sunday, as the woman reclines surrounded by secular comforts, "The holy hush of ancient sacrifice" and "the dark/Encroachment of that old catastrophe" – the crucifixion of Christ – darken her mood, causing her to undertake a mental pilgrimage through time and space back into the shadow realm of religion. This woman is not the poet's persona so much as his anima, the voice of a recidivist part of his soul, full of Christian yearnings. She is perhaps also the first instance of what Stevens called the "interior paramour," an internalized, feminine image of capable imagination. The poem develops as an internal dialogue between poet and woman. The esthete writing letters home within sight and sound of the volcano in *Esthétique* is a less active collaborator in that poem, for he appears in only three strophes (I, II and XIII) and does not speak. He seems an intermittent stand-in for the poet, a scarcely embodied point of view, a peg on which to hang successive meditations. He is, in the context of the late, long poems, a precursor of Stevens' major man or giant-on-the-horizon (compare *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*, I.viii). Part of *Esthétique's* setting, occasion, and inspiration, this man, like the woman of "Sunday Morning," is a silent musier.

"Sunday Morning" and *Esthétique du Mal* both take the form of the loose theme-with-variations. In form, imagery, diction, and rhythm both poems are extraordinarily rich, subtle, and sensuous. The nostalgic tone and train of

echoes and resonances of poets in the great romantic and classical traditions, from Dante through Milton to Wordsworth, Keats, and Tennyson, that "Sunday Morning" and *Esthétique* (to a lesser extent) both arouse, illustrate J.V. Cunningham's thesis that Stevens' hymns of earth are indebted for much of their glamor and power to the heavenly hymns and religious myths they invoke only to reject.² Both poems constitute "a kind of elegy...in space."

Each poem is also highly pictorial. Michel Benamou has pointed out that "Sunday Morning" constitutes a diptych of this world set against an otherworldly paradise that is but a dim reflection of our earth.³ The vivid, particularized still life with which the poem opens, a lady in *déshabille* partaking of coffee and oranges and attended by a green cockatoo,⁴ gives way to a mental journey to the land of the dead. The second stanza reverses this movement, bringing the woman back out of her religious reverie into the gusty weather of planet Earth. She is admonished that "Divinity must live within herself" and, in a passage worthy of comparison with Wordsworth at his best, the poet enumerates the "measures destined for her soul." In the third and fourth strophes, with their parade of mythic personages and affectionately mocking review of successive marriages of earth with heaven, or—in more typically Stevensian terms—of imagination with reality, we have some of Stevens' most "skyey sheets." The three final stanzas revert to juxtaposing images of traditional paradises or heavens (in VI, deliberately recalling the frozen ideal realm of Keats's urn) with the earthly paradise or *terra infidel*.

"Sunday Morning" is integrated through apt trains of imagery, such as repeated and contrasted images of earth, sky, and water. The natural and earthy is continually contrasted with the spiritual and cloudy, particularly in stanzas II, III, VI and VIII. Water is transformed to take on different meanings: a wide expanse of water becomes an oceanic image of time/space in the first and last stanzas. The waterlights of the opening stanza hint at zones and boundaries, as in "The Idea of Order at Key West." There are, in addition, rain and snow (II); rivers and seas (VI), and lake and dew (VII). Water is the source and end of life, as those Arnoldian rivers seeking seas they never find in the seventh stanza suggest. As is usual in Stevens, birds flutter through the poem (pigeons, swallows, quail, a cockatoo), seeming to suggest metonymically (as elsewhere in his work) the evanescent generations of men.⁵ The green cockatoo may be a parodic paraclete. The final image of pigeons descending into darkness on extended wings cannot but recall by antithesis Hopkins' Holy Ghost brooding "over the bent/World...with warm breast and with ah! bright wings."⁶ In "Sunday Morning" nothing and nobody is brooding over this "old chaos of the sun" or "island solitude, unsponsored, free" but the men who inhabit it. *Esthétique du Mal* lacks the aptness and consistency of imagery of "Sunday Morning" and the poem's difficulty is largely due to the obscurity and heterogeneity of its images. Both poems, however, employ the same visual strategy: the poet keeps contrasting images of the earth as paradise with pale simulacra, spectral projections of conventional conceptions of heaven.

The "thesis" of "Sunday Morning" is by now familiar enough to need little commentary. This is not true of *Esthétique*, a poem that requires considerable

too human or anthropomorphic and too self-pitying. This passage is indebted to Nietzsche's indictment of Christianity as the apotheosis of pity and weakness in *Also Sprach Zarathustra*.¹¹ (Nietzsche is also, however, the source of the everlasting yea spoken by the poetic pioneers of new faiths—X.) Nietzsche points out that suffering is always passive and that pity merely compounds it. Pity is hostile to life, but Christianity has espoused the way of suffering and self-denial, constituting, from a Nietzschean point of view, a wholly fictitious faith and factitious morality.

Though tentatively (Stevens characteristically repeats the phrase "as if" no less than six times), Stevens adjures us in *Esthétique's* third strophe that "the health of the world" is enough and must suffice us. "Life is a bitter aspic. We are not/At the center of a diamond." (XI.) Life is a flawed, semi-transparent, semi-opaque, heterogeneous jelly, the ingredients of which are dubious, difficult to assimilate, and predominantly bitter. The image evokes well life's slipperiness, what Emerson describes as "the most unhandsome part of our condition," that is, the "evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest..."¹² On earth all things, all thoughts, and the objects of all thoughts are mixed, all emotions compounded of mingled pleasure and pain. Though the images and tropes of "Sunday Morning" and *Esthétique du Mal* are dualistic, the drive of both poems is holistic, since the objective of both is to realize heaven and hell as united on earth and to conceive of a planet peopled by a race "Completely physical in a physical world." (XV.)

Only in art does aspic become diamond, for it is precisely the vocation and power of imagination to form matter, discover order in chaos, and counter reality's "haggardie" with "halcyon" images. The fourth, ninth, fourteenth and fifteenth sections of *Esthétique du Mal* all, in one way or another, uphold integration against dissipation of thought and feeling. They strive for a difficult unity that, in giving full due to the diversity and multiplicity of this "old chaos of the sun," nevertheless resolves it into harmony. In the fourth part of *Esthétique* sentimentality is condemned as pity was in the preceding section. Only the sentimentalist or dilettante wants to pluck every flower. The spirit of evil is no sentimentalist. If many-in-one or unity-in-multiplicity emerge as Stevens' definition of good, he defines evil as mind and body in conflict, the mind entangled in the "sleek ensolacings" of false faith, the body "Spent in the false engagements of the mind." The true artist, composer (no matter whether B. stand for Bach, Beethoven, or Brahms), or cultivator of nature creates one out of many, not by ignoring the many but by bringing them into relation or harmony. In the fifth strophe, similarly, unity is bliss: it is the relations between human beings and objects that create our heavens or hells. In XIV, Konstantinov is denounced as "the lunatic of one idea/In a world of ideas" who would compel everyone to "Live, work, suffer and die in that idea/In a world of ideas." In endeavoring to create a monolithic (communist) "heaven" on earth, such zealots ignore what Stevens calls "the paradise of meaning" that exists "Merely in living as and where we live" (IX, XV).

The burden of the fifth strophe of *Esthétique* is that humanity should stop

hankering after gods, creating them in its own image, and become "wholly human." In doing so, we will discover divinity to live within ourselves and human love to be all the heaven we can hope for. For this we would willingly, says Stevens (in a charming but precious manner reminiscent of *The Comedian as the Letter C*), "forfeit parades in the obscurer selvages." Stevens bars recourse to external godhead; deity must be found within. The otherworldly longings we have projected as golden forms need to be internalized and reprojected as human emotions finding fulfillment in human relationships. Stevens' cool temperament, however, ill accommodates such Whitmanian affirmation as is contained in the fifth strophe of *Esthétique du Mal* and the seventh stanza of "Sunday Morning." "In-bar" (internal) and "ex-bar" (external) sound like algebraic or logarithmic formulae and love made "Once by the lips, once by the services/Of central sense" sounds less like lovemaking than communication via a telephone exchange! The theme of human solidarity or shared emotion lacks conviction for, when speaking of the brotherhood of man, Stevens' voice tends to rise to a boisterous shout (as in the seventh stanza of "Sunday Morning") or sink to an embarrassed whisper (as here in *Esthétique*).

The following section of *Esthétique du Mal* is in Stevens' parabolic mode. It is a parable of human imagination (the bird) feeding on reality (the sun) like ripe fruit. The seventh strophe, with its Dantesque rose and "soldier of time grown deathless in great size," reminds us of the poet's preoccupation with war at the time he wrote *Esthétique*. This soldier, one of Stevens' heroes or major men, is an abstraction, one who stands for many. He now enjoys "deathless rest" for, as Stevens vividly and movingly demonstrates in the concluding quatrain of this section, "No part of him was ever part of death." Death is a reality only for the living who remember, mourn, and yearn for the dead. "A woman smoothes her forehead with her hand/And the soldier of time lies calm beneath that stroke"—these two images brilliantly juxtapose living and dead, showing how that which rejects us saves us in the end and illustrating too the necessary exorcism by the living of the grief that afflicts them, not the dead.

The human imagination's exorcism of the devil is acknowledged by Stevens to be tragic in section VIII. The death of God necessarily implies that of Satan. In a poem about *mal* or evil it is perhaps not surprising that the poet should dwell more on the vacuum left by the denial of the devil than on that left by the withdrawal of God. Satan was God's twin, born to serve similar (though opposed) human needs, to aspire and to fall.

How cold the vacancy
When the phantoms are gone and the shaken realist
First sees reality.

In his *Adagia* Stevens defines reality as a vacuum; human nature abhorring such, it must be filled. The will to believe can not be broken; the negative movement of the dialectic is followed by a positive one, as affirmation succeeds denial.

After the final no there comes a yes
And on that yes the future world depends.
.....
It can never be satisfied, the mind, never.¹³

The poem goes on to evoke the panic of the imagination before it has constructed any shield against or prism through which to view the vacancy of reality. The same momentary failure of imagination is described in "The Man on the Dump":

Everything is shed; and the moon comes up as the moon
(All its images are in the dump) and you see
As a man (not like the image of a man),
You see the moon rise in the empty sky.¹⁴

At such times the old fictions seem betrayals, so much so one becomes profoundly disillusioned with imagination itself. But we cannot dispense with imagination or the will to create and to believe in our creations; we can only consign the old, outworn fictions and beliefs to the dump. Stevens envisions imagination as a great fountain soaring into the cold emptiness of space (like the synesthetic blood/chant/fountain that fills the empty sky in the seventh stanza of "Sunday Morning"). Again here the poet espouses a return to nature at her grossest, most primal and fecund. The interior paramour, imagination, weds the external world, shunning mystical marriages with female centaurs with features of heaven and earth fantastically mingled. Images of intercourse fuse with those of birth as the imagination is born again.

Of all the poets who have studied the nostalgias only to reject them, Stevens may well be the most regretfully ruthless. In studying *Esthétique du Mal* and, even more so, "Sunday Morning," one realizes that Christianity in particular was profoundly attractive to Stevens at the same time that he found it false, stale, and enervating. He had indeed studied the nostalgias. The last of these is the ineluctable desire to understand suffering. But suffering is as innocent of meaning as life, says Stevens. If pain is intrinsically human, it is also impersonal, however obdurately we persist in regarding misfortune as a personal visitation or judgment upon us.

In "Sunday Morning" death is proclaimed the mother of beauty. In *Esthétique du Mal*, only the gaiety of language can transfigure pain and suffering.

The tongue caresses these exacerbations.
They press it as epicure, distinguishing
Themselves from its essential savor,
Like hunger that feeds on its own hungriness.

Here art, not death, is the mother of beauty. This passage reminds one of those sections of *Four Quartets* in which Eliot muses on the powers and limitations

of language. Hunger feeding on its own hungriness recalls Eliot's giving that famishes the craving and Nietzsche's observation that happiness always hungers for an eternity of joy but, by consuming itself thus, courts grief.¹⁵ Stevens, however, affirms that the insatiable longing for beauty and surcease from pain makes us create beauty out of suffering, still recognizing that the beauty inheres not at all in the painful experiences described but in the beauty of the description.

Esthétique's twelfth canto is obscure. In it Stevens "disposes the world" into three separate realms—the peopled, the unpeopled, and a third world "In which no one peers," a world of unmediated reality. These three realms seem to parallel Kant's: the peopled world corresponds to the world of objective phenomena; the unpeopled, to the subjective sphere of inner sense experience, and the "third world" to the noumenal realm of the *Ding an sich*. Stevens asks (since we know others only through our perceptions) whether we know others through knowledge of ourselves or ourselves through knowledge of others? If the former, others can have no secrets from us; if the latter, we can have no secrets from them. But at times when it is imperative to know the truth, which kind of knowledge is most reliable? As well as supplementing each other, Stevens seems to think that subjective and objective knowledge may cancel each other out; both are incomplete and unreliable. Confrontation of the indifferent, impersonal universe would remove us from both realms and plunge us into his "third world," a "land beyond the mind,"¹⁶ where we are truly alone and cease to know ourselves or anything else. Here whatever is, is true. But who could survive such a barren landscape without becoming inhuman? To become a permanent feature of it would be to die.

The thirteenth strophe of *Esthétique* concerns the stubborn refusal of suffering to submit to intellectual manipulation. This is a meditation on the nature of retribution, tragedy, and fate. Like Nietzsche, Stevens perceives thoughts of retribution and punishment follow hard on suffering's heels. The poet is little concerned with any moral law whereby the son's life becomes a punishment for the father's, since father and son are each alike "spent" in

the necessity of being
Himself, the unalterable necessity
Of being this unalterable animal.

What concerns the poet is the universal tragedy, the "force of nature in action." In the first part of this Nietzschean section, this is described as being "the happiest enemy" as well as tragic, reflecting Nietzsche's and Stevens' view that suffering is creative as well as destructive. But the conclusion of this section is characteristically Stevensian: we are to endure evil, of which we are a part, "with the politest helplessness."

The penultimate and final strophes of *Esthétique du Mal* form a deliberate contrast with each other. The former exposes the lunacy of extreme logic, of cleaving to a single idea in a world of ideas. Stevens makes an excursion here into the politics of revolution. In Geneva he has chosen an apt locale, for that

city has been the breeding ground for many narrow, extreme sects and faiths and a refuge for religious and ideological reformers, notably during the time of the Reformation and the Russian Revolution. "Lakes are more reasonable than oceans." The Lake of Geneva, so grey and temperate compared with the fiery Bay of Naples, say, seems, by its very mildness, to have offered the ideal climate for religious and secular firebrands. Epitome of the bourgeois, Geneva has fomented violent revolutions in its tepid bosom. Stevens would have us measure and temper our faiths against the magnitude of sky or ocean or the immanent power of the volcano; if our surroundings are more temperate and lacustrine, we should at least not forget the lake – as logical lunatics do.

In the final stanza of *Esthétique du Mal*, Stevens declares that "The greatest poverty is not to live/In a physical world." We should not confound desire with despair by longing for imperishable bliss. Nothing is to be envied like life on earth. Again, as in "Sunday Morning," Stevens mocks the traditional conception of the afterlife. ("Alas that they should wear our colors there...") In a diptych of this and the other world reminiscent of "Sunday Morning," he ironically reverses our longing for eternity, showing the metaphysicals, "the non-physical people" looking longingly on the earth, envying our palpable life, our green world, and the major music of our emotions. Of these they enjoy only the pallid facsimile human imagination attributes to them. The poet reviews the evidence of the senses – sight, speech, hearing, and feeling – finding that in and through these the health of the world inheres – and suffices. Attributing the final benison to these and these alone, since these constitute all our health and wealth, he rounds out the poem with a "right chorale" like that in "Sunday Morning."

A hymn to the earth like "Sunday Morning," *Esthétique du Mal* wrestles with the enigma of evil principally on a metaphysical plane. Stevens believes suffering, like joy, to be "innocent" – no more to be explained or justified than life itself. Pain is an inescapable part of the earthly paradise Stevens celebrates. The poet resolves it, like all the other multifarious and multivalent notes of experience, into an ultimate harmony. The notes, like the diverse sections of this long poem, may appear separate and contradictory even, but the final chord is "one vast, subjugating final tone,"¹⁷ like that admired in the fourth strophe.

Dust as we are, the immortal spirit grows
Like harmony in music; there is a dark
Inscrutable workmanship that reconciles
Discordant elements, makes them cling together
In one society.¹⁸

Esthétique du Mal creates beauty out of suffering, demonstrating its thesis in the very articulation of it. It proclaims Stevens' faith in the power of poetry to take the place of empty heaven and its hymns, even in the midst of war and universal suffering. It declares what a mighty fortress is our language. If the poem ultimately impresses us as rather inhuman, it is probably because life for

Stevens was more “an affair of places” than of people.¹⁹ *Esthétique du Mal* looks only fleetingly and awkwardly to that mightier defense against “the heartache and the thousand natural shocks/That flesh is heir to” — the fortress of human love.

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NOTES

1. *The Man With the Blue Guitar*, V in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York, 1954), p. 167. Hereafter referred to as *CP*.
2. “Tradition and Modernity: Wallace Stevens,” reprinted in *The Achievement of Wallace Stevens*, eds. Ashley Brown & Robert S. Haller (New York & Philadelphia, 1962), pp. 123-40. See especially p. 136.
3. “Some Relations Between Poetry and Painting,” reprinted in *The Achievement of Wallace Stevens*, pp. 239-40.
4. Possibly Stevens imaged the cockatoo as a figure woven into a rug like the one in the bathroom of the house he lived in in New York City in 1900. See *The Letters of Wallace Stevens* (New York, 1966), p. 38. Hereafter referred to as *LWS*.
5. See, for example, “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle,” X & XII, *CP*, 16-18 and *Credences of Summer*, IX, *CP*, 377 and cf. *Esthétique du Mal*, VI, *CP*, 318.
6. “God’s Grandeur.”
7. *LWS*, p. 468.
8. Cf. *Credences of Summer*, VI, *CP*, 375—
It is a mountain half way green and then,
The other immeasurable half, such rock
As placid air becomes.
9. R.W. Emerson, *Selected Essays, Lectures & Poems*, ed. w/ intro. by Robert E. Spiller (New York, 1965), p. 305.
10. *Credences of Summer*, *CP*, 375.
11. Also *Sprach Zarathustra*, Part I and *The Joyful Wisdom*, Part III in *The Portable Nietzsche*, sel. & trans. w/ intro. by Walter Kaufmann, (New York, 1968).
12. “Experience” in *Selected Essays, Lectures & Poems*, p. 299.
13. “The Well Dressed Man With a Beard,” *CP*, 247.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 202.
15. Also *Sprach Zarathustra*, Part IV, *The Portable Nietzsche*, p. 435.
16. “Extracts From Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas,” *CP*, 252.
17. *The Comedian as the Letter C*, I, *CP*, 30.
18. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, 1.337-40.
19. See *Adagia, Opus Posthumous*, ed. w/ intro. by Samuel French Morse (New York, 1957), p. 158.

STEVENS AS REGIONAL POET

MILTON J. BATES

Nota: His soil is man's intelligence" – you recall that these momentous words signal a turning point in the career of Crispin, whose adventures Stevens recounts in "The Comedian as the Letter C" (1923). Crispin had sailed from Bordeaux pledged to the contrary thesis, that man is the intelligence of his soil. That proposition had, however, proved unseaworthy. Confronted with the infinite expanse of ocean, buffeted by the awesome power of the wind, he converts from romantic to realist. Alas, his new faith proves not very conducive to poetry. What Crispin experiences in Yucatan and especially in Carolina would constitute a hefty volume of realistic poetry, could he only translate his experience into words. But he is helpless either to write such poetry or to revert to his first thesis.

Making the best of a bad situation, Crispin decides to found a colony of regional poets: the man from Georgia will be pine-spokesman, the Florida planter will pluck the banjo's categorical gut, the Californian will make the intricate Sierra scan, the Brazilian will muse immaculate pampean dits. In concert, they will produce a veritable anthology of the Americas. But Crispin's colony never gets beyond the prospectus stage, for he realizes that it is as romantic in its way as the poetry he had written in Bordeaux. In the earlier version of "Comedian" entitled "From the Journal of Crispin" (published earlier this year with notes and an introduction by Louis Martz), Crispin is left at this impasse – though the final line of the poem leaves the door slightly ajar: "Thereafter he may stalk in other spheres."

We might, I think, regard "From the Journal of Crispin" as a fable of Stevens' poetic career up to 1921, when he submitted the poem in competition for a prize offered by the Poetry Society of South Carolina. Though Stevens had experienced nothing as dramatic as Crispin's sea-change, he had come to feel that he had exhausted the poetic possibilities of Bordeaux. By "Bordeaux" I mean those remnants of the French and English Decadence which had provided him with the subject matter and style of many *Harmonium* poems. Not that there weren't also bits of Americana strewn throughout the volume; one thinks immediately of the poems set in Oklahoma, the Carolinas, Uncle Remus' South, Arkansas, Connecticut, Tennessee and preeminently Florida. But how many of these places have a distinct regional identity in Stevens' early poetry? Only Florida might qualify, and she is treated as mistress rather than alma mater. Stevens did not wish to know her as, for example, his friend Judge Powell knew Georgia. He cherished her for her exoticism, precisely as he cherished the legacy of the *fin de siècle*. Hence the poems set in America did little to alleviate Stevens' fear that *Harmonium* was a "Trinket pasticcio," a medley of assumed voices and masks. Writing to Harriet Monroe in 1922, he avowed that he wished to remain as obscure as possible until he had perfected an authentic and fluent speech for himself (L 231).

How obscure Stevens remained during the decade following *Harmonium* we all know; and when he resumed writing in the early thirties his authenticity

was not of the sort we would expect from reading "The Comedian as the Letter C." Inasmuch as he no longer cultivated the idiom of the aesthete and dandy, and occasionally addressed the social realities of the Depression, he did write as though man's soil is his intelligence. Generally speaking, however, he rededicated himself during this period to pure poetry – to poetry, that is, in which poetry itself is the true subject of the poem. Though a pure poem may have a particular region as its nominal setting, it seeks to transcend locale, to occupy an "absence in reality" (CP 176). Thus Stevens told Hi Simons in 1940 that "the idea of pure poetry: imagination, extended beyond local consciousness, may be an idea to be held in common by South, West, North and East" (L 370). When he speaks in this same letter of the "Ananke" of "The Greenest Continent" as a symbol of trans-local imagination, we recognize Ananke as a precursor of the ultimate pure poem, the supreme fiction.

Stevens' career tended, like Crispin's, to proceed by contrary theses. He was no sooner pledged to his quest for the supreme fiction than he undertook another quest which led him, not to a generic reality merely, but to a specific region. Beginning in 1941, he began to devote a considerable amount of time to the study of his past. It would take me scarcely less time to recount the course of his genealogical study, and in any case I am more interested in its implications for his life and work. Suffice it to say, here, that Stevens came to regard himself as a product of his ancestral past, both physically and spiritually. What is more, he came to see his "reality-imagination complex" (L 792) as a latter-day version of complementary instincts that informed his ancestors' lives: their belief in God and their attachment to the soil. It was Old John Zeller, stirring restlessly in the "bed" of his grandson's freethinking mind, who impelled Stevens to imagine a supreme fiction that would supply the satisfactions once found in religious belief. It was a host of Zellers and Stevenses and Barcalows who drew him back, both actually and in imagination, to those places in eastern Pennsylvania that figure in his poems of the forties: the Tulpehocken, Ephrata, Tinicum, the Oley Valley, the Dutch cemetery at Feasterville, Perkiomen Creek, the Swatara and Schuylkill Rivers.

If Stevens has any claim to being a regional poet, it must rest on these poems. In what sense, if any, do they belong to the literature of regionalism? Certainly they do not reflect intimate daily contact with their nominal settings. Though Stevens continued all his life to refer to Reading and the surrounding countryside as "home," he had realized even as a college student that he could not go home again. Since he had lived most of his adult life in Hartford, he had perhaps better claim to being a Connecticut Yankee than a Pennsylvania Dutchman. "It is not that I am a native," he said in a radio script written to represent his adopted state in a Voice of America broadcast series, "but that I feel like one" (OP 296). Yet Stevens' Pennsylvania poems do express regionalism of a kind, and I think we can begin to specify that kind by looking at "The Countryman," first published in *The Auroras of Autumn* in 1950.

Before turning to "The Countryman" itself, I should note that its title invokes an ideal to which Stevens frequently recurs in the poetry of the late forties and early fifties, and which may owe something to his genealogical study. We have all noticed how people identify with ancestors to the point of

adopting their prejudices or making virtue of their necessity. One person learns that his great-grandfather was an anti-vivisectionist and swears off dismembering animals; another discovers a Swiss branch of the family and conceives a sudden aversion to Kansas. The same was true of Stevens: the more he learned about the farmers and craftsmen in his past, the more he valued what might be called "peasant" virtues and the more he sought the trademark of the peasant in contemporary art and literature, as a token of authenticity. It pleased him to reflect that the painter Tal Coat, from whom he purchased a still life distinguished, as he put it, by "solidity, burliness, aggressiveness," was a Breton peasant (*L* 654). In Stevens' poem based on the painting, a reddish-brown Venetian glass dish became the "angel" neglected by the fashionable or merely aesthetic artists of the day – reality; the objects surrounding this angel became the befitting entourage of reality, a group of peasants. In literature, Stevens admired the fiction of Henri Pourrat, laureate of his native Auvergne. He likewise praised fellow poet John Crowe Ransom as the "instinct and expression" of Tennessee in a homage he contributed to the *Sewanee Review* on the occasion of Ransom's sixtieth birthday (*OP* 260).

Like Coat, Pourrat and Ransom, the countryman of Stevens' poem is perfectly attuned to his native reality, in this case the Swatara River, which flows through Lebanon County to the Susquehanna River and thence into Chesapeake Bay. Here, then, is the poem:

Swatara, Swatara, black river,
Descending, out of the cap of midnight,
Toward the cape at which
You enter the swarthy sea,

Swatara, Swatara, heavy the hills
Are, hanging above you, as you move,
Move blackly and without crystal.
A countryman walks beside you.

He broods of neither cap nor cape,
But only of your swarthy motion,
But always of the swarthy water,
Of which Swatara is the breathing,

The name. He does not speak beside you.
He is there because he wants to be
And because being there in the heavy hills
And along the moving of the water –

Being there is being in a place,
As of a character everywhere,
The place of a swarthy presence moving,
Slowly, to the look of a swarthy name.

The countryman is so absorbed in the immediate physical presence of the river, so content with merely "being there," that he considers neither its source in hill-cap nor its destination in ocean cape. He is presumably also indifferent to that aspect of the river which most engages the writer of the poem: its linguistic reality. For Stevens as poet, the Swatara is a phenomenon of sound, in this case the darkly sinuous sound of its Indian name. The Indian name in turn suggests the Anglo-Saxon adjective "swarthy," which he uses five times in counterpoint with the word "Swatara." In effect, the poem measures the distance between Stevens and the countryman he aspired to be in some of his late work.

To be sure, the regional writer is always something of a contradiction, for writing entails a degree of detachment and self-consciousness which qualify his regional identity. Stevens recognized this in Ransom's case when he observed that as soon as a man isolates the emotions aroused by familiar local objects, so as to understand those emotions, he ceases to be a native and becomes an outsider – or, rather, he becomes an insider and an outsider at once. Yet Stevens maintains that the poet's identity as "insider" can remain the base of his character and the material of his imagination (*OP* 260-61). To write convincingly about life, he told José Rodríguez Feo, one must write not as a student or artist but as "a good barbarian, a true Cuban, or a true Pennsylvania Dutchman" (*L* 624). On another occasion, he resorted to a foreign tongue to tell Henry Church that "*Il faut être paysan d'être poète*" (*L* 461). Taken together, these remarks say it all: Stevens was a Pennsylvania Dutchman who wrote always of his native region, but always in the language of the outsider. What he called his "unique and solitary home" in the "The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain" (1952) was not the Pennsylvania of his boyhood, exactly, but a *paysage imaginaire* derived from it. To conclude, then, we might define Stevens' kind of regionalism by revising Crispin's second thesis to read, "His soil is the poet's intelligence – provided the poet is simultaneously the intelligence of his soil."

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Robert Pack

Robert Buffel

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