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# Stevens' Psychology of Reading: "Man Carrying Thing" and Its Sources

B. J. LEGGETT

"The poem must resist the intelligence/Almost successfully"; so begins one of Wallace Stevens' characteristic poems about poems, an exercise in poetic theorizing with the unlikely title "Man Carrying Thing."[1] The aim of the poem is ostensibly to illustrate its opening pronouncement through a two-part analogy: first, a concept of the poetic work figured as the unidentifiable man of the title who on a winter evening carries something which also escapes identity; then the uncertain details of a poem seen as the first scattered flakes of snow which trouble our thoughts through a winter night. The apparent argument of "Man Carrying Thing" is that we must accept our lack of immediate comprehension until these doubtful elements have time to accumulate, and the "bright obvious stands motionless in cold" (l. 14).

It is possible to read the poem as a dispute against interpretation, or at least against the "necessitous sense" which is not content with the "obvious whole" and endeavors to reduce poetry to paraphrase (ll. 5,7). But it is not simply that, since the conclusion suggests that a poetic work which is grasped as a whole will eventually surrender its ambiguous parts. It is perhaps closer to the mark to say that the poem is an attempt at a kind of psychology of reading. It argues for a state of mind which is most favorable to the appreciation of poetry, one in which the reader is content to remain in an indeterminate condition, resisting the intellectual urge to exhaust each figure or connection. The poem also hints at the assumption behind this argument, the notion that the too obvious, the too easily comprehended, is antithetical to the reader's pleasure of poetry.

My intention here is not, however, to offer a reading of the poem but to examine some of the origins of the idea of poetry that led to its composition. "Man Carrying Thing" expresses an attitude toward the reading of poetry which came to Stevens through at least two sources. The first is related to the custom he maintained throughout his career of explicating, sometimes at great length, passages of his verse for readers and admirers. The second may be discovered in his reading in poetic theory and, in particular, his careful study of Charles Mauron's *Aesthetics and Psychology*. I should like to discuss the influence of each of these before returning finally to the poem itself.

## I

While preparing for the 1941 Princeton lecture "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" Stevens wrote to Henry Church, "The truth is that, if you want to work your way through your library, the simplest way to go about it is to have a definite subject and then to look for something pertinent to it. I find something pertinent everywhere; I must have two or three dozen books

on my table that I had never looked at before."[2] Among the books he found pertinent to the subject of "The Noble Rider" was Charles Mauron's *Aesthetics and Psychology*, and Stevens' copy of the book, in the Wallace Stevens Archive at the Huntington Library,[3] retains the traces of his scrutiny. He marked a great number of passages throughout the volume, added notations on the front and back fly leaves, and maintained a running paraphrase of Mauron's discussion in the margins.[4] Noting the care with which Stevens followed Mauron's argument, one is not surprised to discover echoes of it in "The Noble Rider" and in a lecture completed a bit earlier, "The Irrational Element in Poetry." However, the influence of Mauron's psychological approach to aesthetics appears to have extended beyond Stevens' lectures. Several of the more theoretical poems that follow the period of research for "The Noble Rider" may profitably be read in the light of Mauron's poetics. Of these, "Man Carrying Thing" is most directly related to the argument of *Aesthetics and Psychology.*

Mauron's attraction for Stevens may have owed something to the rather tentative attitude toward poetic theory both men held. At a time when Stevens was being forced somewhat against his will into the position of lecturer and aesthetician, he discovered a young French critic who emphasized the contribution to aesthetics of the gifted amateur, a role Stevens found quite congen-*ial.*[5] Stevens' marginal notation in Chapter II of *Aesthetics and Psychology* aptly summarizes the point of view Mauron adopts. "The role of amateurs," Stevens wrote, "is to make known our reactions and our generalizations therefrom stated without any other respect than that for fact."[6]

But more important for Stevens ultimately was the substance of Mauron's argument, his formulation of a concept of the mind in its encounter with the utilitarian world which appealed so strongly to Stevens that he continued to echo it throughout his career. In *Aesthetics and Psychology* Mauron attempts, through the ordering of his own impressions, to define the boundary between what he terms the "aesthetic emotion" and the emotions of ordinary life. Following Roger Fry, he finds this line in a distinction between two attitudes of mind—the active and contemplative. The difference between life and art for Mauron is that in the former the mind is continually anticipating future action while in the latter it is absorbed in the present. Assuming that the function of art is to give pleasure, he argues that the work of art stimulates us without requiring a corresponding reflex. Since we don't have to act on it, our interest lies solely in what we feel. And because the artist offers us something we can make no use of, he gives potential pleasures every possible opportunity; the mind is suspended just at the point where pleasure becomes manifest, between the stimulus and the response. The artist, Mauron states in a sentence Stevens borrowed for "The Noble Rider," transforms us into epicures. Stevens, in a marginal note, puts the case in his own words:

> A work of art is inactive and useless and constitutes a stimulus, which we enjoy for its own sake, since it entails no reaching beyond the enjoyment of the sensation it provokes. Thus the basis of the aesthetic emotion is the aesthetic attitude; contemplation without any idea of making use of the object of contemplation.[7]

The last seventy pages of *Aesthetics and Psychology* develop several implications which follow from Mauron's equation of the contemplative state of mind with the aesthetic attitude. One implication which held great interest for Stevens has to do with the relationship between the artist and his audience, and especially the degree to which the work of art is accessible to the audience. Stevens' letters reveal that this was a question that had been occupying him for some time prior to his encounter with Mauron. *Aesthetics and Psychology*, however, offered a theoretical justification for a position which Stevens had held more or less instinctively.

## II

A few months before Stevens began his reading for "The Noble Rider" he completed a series of detailed letters to Hi Simons, one of his earliest advocates, in which he offered paraphrases or explanations for passages of his verse Simons found difficult.[8] This exercise prompted Stevens to consider again the questions of poetic meaning, intention, and interpretation. As early as 1928 he had declared himself opposed to close scrutiny and paraphrase. "Your analysis of this poem is much too close," he wrote to L.W. Payne, Jr., in regard to Payne's reading of "Le Mononcle de Mon Oncle," and in the same letter he commented on "Domination of Black": "I am sorry that a poem of this sort has to contain any ideas at all, because its sole purpose is to fill the mind with the images & sounds that it contains. A mind that examines such a poem for its prose contents gets absolutely nothing from it."[9] Several years later he amplified this objection in a letter to Ronald Lane Latimer: "I have the greatest dislike for explanations. As soon as people are perfectly sure of a poem they are just as likely as not to have no further interest in it; it loses whatever potency it had."[10]

His initial response to the long questionnaire he received from Simons early in 1940 was the same as his previous comment to Latimer, but as was often the case, Stevens' kindness toward an admirer won out over his principles and after offering sound reasons for refusing to explain his poems (including an interesting anticipation of the formalists' intentional fallacy), he readily complied:

> A long time ago I made up my mind not to explain things, because most people have so little appreciation of poetry that once a poem has been explained it has been destroyed: that is to say, they are no longer able to seize the poem. Morever, even in a case like your own, or in the case of any critic, I think that the critic is under obligation to base his remarks on what he has before him. It is not a question of what an author meant to say but of what he has said. In the case of a competent critic the author may well have a great deal to find out about himself and his work. This goes to the extent of saying that it would be legitimate for a critic to make statements respecting the purpose of an author's work that were altogether contrary to the intentions of the author. Notwithstanding this, you are so interested in what I have done that I shall be glad to answer your questions....[11]

In the course of answering queries about passages from a great number of poems from *Harmonium, Ideas of Order, The Man with the Blue Guitar,* and *Owl's Clover* in letters that ran from January through August of 1940, Stevens continued to protest what he was doing even as he compiled pages of paraphrase.[12] After offering readings for more than a dozen poems he noted that his explanations seemed "a good deal more fixed" than he would have liked, and he wrote Simons a mild disclaimer which reveals that he had been pondering the whole question of interpretation:

> Obviously, it is not possible to tell what one's own poems mean, or were intended to mean. On the other hand, it is not the simplest thing in the world to explain a poem. I thought of it this way this morning: a poem is like a man walking on the bank of a river, whose shadow is reflected in the water. If you explain a poem, you are quite likely to do it either in terms of the man or in terms of the shadow, but you have to explain it in terms of the whole. When I said recently that a poem was what was on the page, it seems to me now that I was wrong because that is explaining in terms of the man. But the thing and its double always go together.[13]

Characteristically, Stevens has here converted the abstract issue into a metaphor which manages simultaneously to heighten it and to obscure it. To think of a poem as a man and his reflection, the one clear the other shadowy, is to suggest the sense of doubleness that Stevens recognized in his own attempts at commentary, a distinction between what is on the page and what is more elusive and obscure. But as in the case with many of Stevens's illustrative figures, this one itself escapes paraphrase and leaves us at the level of the unparaphrasable poem, the concept the figure was invented to clarify. The man seems to represent the printed poem, what is on the page, but it is unclear whether the reflection represents the poem's meaning or content, the poet's intention, the reader's response, or something even more elusive. And it is equally difficult to determine from the metaphor the relationship between the two, the "whole" which ideally is the object for explication. It will be noted that Stevens returned to this basic figure – man and shadow, "the thing and its double" – in "Man Carrying Thing" with somewhat the same ambiguous result. However, by the time of the poem's composition the figure would be modified and complicated by his reading of Mauron's discussion of this issue.[14]

## III

Mauron's view of poetic meaning in the relationship between the artist and the audience is based on his assumption that the creation of art is a product of a contemplative state of mind which is attempting only to prolong the present, to savor existence instead of letting it escape. The artist, therefore, is not interested in saying something to others but in expressing himself for the sheer joy of expression. He uses a language without really aiming at being understood, since he speaks for the pleasure of speaking. It follows, then, that the audience

understands only in part or not at all; misunderstandings are the rule rather than the exception:

> ...if we remember that every artist creates his own idiom according to the inward echoes peculiar to himself, it will be admitted that his chance of being understood (even if he wished to be) is comparatively slight... Certainly *something* passes from artist to auditor; but that the transmission must needs be bad who can deny?[15]

Yet this lack of comprehension on the part of the audience is of little concern to Mauron. If fact, since the proper mental state for the enjoyment of art is one of passive detachment comparable to that of the artist (the auditor's version of prolonging the present), the absence of immediate understanding is a desirable condition. The following passage, whoch develops this notion, may sound vaguely familiar to the reader of "Man Carrying Thing":

> ...two elements in a work of art may very well be connected by a relation deliberately introduced by the artist, but unperceived by the spectator, especially at first sight. Aesthetic order is meant to be felt rather than analyzed; the existence of a combination produces a vague and delightful impression of continuity and order; we feel ourselves in a harmonious atmosphere. But the more intimate analysis of this delight of the shades and causes, requires technical knowledge which the spectator does not necessarily possess. Moreover... aesthetic order, if it is to become a source of pleasure, must remain hidden in a sort of twilight where we may have the joy of discovering it. So if the reader does not perceive at a glance the system of combinations in a work which yet he feels has "form," I advise him to be patient; to-morrow, or perhaps ten years hence, he will see it revealed to his astonished eyes.[16]

Here is the essential concept of Stevens' poem. One must be cautious in attributing too much to sources, but it is nevertheless true that much of the poem may be found in Mauron and in the analogy Stevens elaborated in his January 1940 letter to Hi Simons. There the poem was "like a man walking on the bank of a river, whose shadow is reflected in the water." In "Man Carrying Thing" Stevens retains the figure of the man but alters the reflection to a shadowy thing he carries. In the original analogy the man was clear, the reflection elusive. Now, however, both man and thing are cast into the "sort of twilight" which Mauron recommends for the proper reception of art:

> A brune figure in winter evening resists
> Identity. The thing he carries resists
>
> The most necessitous sense. Accept them, then
> As secondary (parts not quite perceived
> Of the obvious whole, uncertain particles
> Of the certain solid, the primary free from doubt...(ll. 3-8)

The "obvious whole" here, Mauron's "form," is stated by the title – it is a man carrying a thing. Only the secondary elements are, in Mauron's words, "unperceived by the spectator, especially at first sight." And since "aesthetic order is meant to be felt rather than analyzed," Mauron's spectator, from whose point of view the poem is given, is presented with an image which resists the analysis that would produce identity and thereby destroy the contemplative moment.

In the final six lines of the poem Stevens shifts the imaged from the vague figure to the atmosphere of the winter evening itself. The floating "parts not quite perceived" become the first flakes of snow of a winter storm. Here again Stevens' image seems to owe something to two passages in Mauron. The first is the conclusion to the passage already quoted, where the reader who "does not perceive at a glance the system of combinations in a work" is advised to be patient so that "to-morrow... he will see it revealed to his astonished eyes." The second passage, a few pages later, states the issue in slightly different terms: "...I am theoretically certain that all the *unexplained* harmony which remains in a work of art after the most scrupulous analysis, hangs on correspondences felt in their entirety but almost undistinguishable one by one, lost in minute inflections where we should be almost ashamed to look for them."[17]

In "Man Carrying Thing" the details which are barely distinguishable one by one but felt in their entirety are the "Things floating like the first hundred flakes of snow/ Out of a storm we must endure all night" (ll. 9-10). The revelation of that entirety which comes tomorrow to our astonished eyes is contained in the poem's brilliant conclusion: "We must endure our thoughts all night, until/ The bright obvious stands motionless in cold" (ll. 13-14). Stevens' snow metaphor manages to convey the essential elements of Mauron's more abstract formulation without surrendering its own unparaphrasable quality. It suggests the wonder of that which is passively experienced after a prolonged period of troublesome thought, as the night's analysis of the portent of scattered snowflakes gives way to the morning's easy realization of their accumulated significance. There is even something here of the chagrin implied in Mauron's statement that correspondences felt in their entirety may have been lost "in minute inflections where we should be almost ashamed to look for them." The thoughts endured all night indeed seem foolish in light of the "bright obvious" so effortlessly gained.

It is, however, misleading to imply that Stevens's poem yields its meaning so quickly or finally as this analysis may suggest, and herein lies an interesting complication of the theory of reading it expounds. Behind the poem lies the assumption held by Mauron and Stevens that the too easily apprehended, like the clichéd and hackneyed, works to undermine the pleasure of art. When Stevens noted to Simons and Latimer that a poem which had been explained lost its potency, he anticipated a similar discussion by Mauron, who offers an explanation for phenomenon. The distinction maintained throughout his essay between the active and the contemplative attitudes leads Mauron to a concept of originality as an essential element of the aesthetic emotion. The motive of the artist, he notes, "consists in obeying solely his aesthetic pleasure," and he finds pleasure only in that which is an original discovery.[18] For that reason he

will avoid analogies already known. "He will delight, on the contrary, in resemblances buried in the complexity of the real, those that are felt and divined rather than perceived distincly." Moreover, he will avoid a systematic or logical linking of resemblances:

> ...the interest, for him lies in tasting a spiritual atmosphere rather than in reaching definite conclusions. It is enough that the work should convey an impression, even though vague, of a reality richer in unforseen correspondences than the ordinary world.[20]

It is for this reason that the "sincere artist has a horror of repeating himself."[20]

The horror which Mauron's artist feels in the unoriginal, the too familiar and definite, finds its way into the poem in a curious line which seems at first barely connected to the adjacent passages: "A horror of thoughts that suddenly are real" (l. 12). Although Stevens presumably shifts this reaction from poet to audience, the distiction hardly matters since Mauron's assumption is that the spectator's experience is a lesser version of the artist's in the act of creation. However, the tangled syntax of the sentence in which Stevens's line appears leaves open the question of whether it is the poet or the reader who is horrified at the immediately obvious. This is one of a number of instances of his tendency to blur the links and connections of the poem. It slips almost imperceptibly from the opening analogy of man and thing to the metaphor of the snow storm. The *them* of line five starts as a reference to the obscure figure and the object he carries and ends by referring to the "first hundred flakes of snow." The reader may well wonder what logic has led him from the external world of vague objects at the beginning to the internal world of the mind with which the poem concludes. In fact, the secondary elements of the poem are left unresolved, and the "necessitious sense" which seeks a logic in the connection between the two primary images will remain frustrated. The poet here illustrates his own "horror of thoughts that suddenly are real," casting the entire poem in a syntax so hazy as to make exact paraphrase impossible.

There is, then, a subtle irony in the opening couplet, which reads in full, "The poem must resist the intelligence/ Almost successfully. Illustration...." To illustrate is, in one sense, to make clear by giving examples, and the poem begins as if it were attempting to clarify its abstract opening statement. But of course it is itself an example of the thing it is to clarify, and this forces an apparent dilemma. If a poem must resist the intelligence, how may a poem be used to set forth this aspect of poetry? If it is clear and definite, it violates its nature as poetry; if it retains its necessary obscurity, it fails as illustration. Stevens finds one escape from this paradox in the qualification *almost*, but he does not rest with that. The triumph of "Man Carrying Thing" is that it is, as a poem, a perfect exemplification of its own theory. We apprehend it as a whole but lose our way in its structure, which keeps the mind suspended until the last line produces the impression of a resolution. It is only an impression, however, since the "bright obvious" of the conclusion has only the most tenuous relation to the initial puzzle of man and thing.

The word *illustration* in the second line is thus an instance of the poem's necessary ambiguity. The apparent function is to point to the remainder of the poem as a set of examples, but because the examples themselves resist analysis and the form of the poem evades the intelligence, we discover that a second sense of the term also applies. That is, the poem does not simply offer a set of illustrations of a proposition but is itself, in its form, an illustration of the proposition that the poem (both *a* poem and *this* poem) must resist the intelligence almost successfully.

"Man Carrying Thing" is not one of Stevens' more widely discussed theoretical poems, yet it reveals an attitude toward poetry which clearly influenced the nature of Stevens' verse. The assumptions about poetry which prompted it would seem to be directly related to the evasive and difficult style of the later poems whch have so successfully resisted the efforts of commentators. Stevens has easily acquired the reputation of the most obscure of our major poets—in Harold Bloom's words, "the most advanced rhetorician in modern poetry and in his major phase the most disjunctive."[21] The conception of reading poetry which Stevens evolved, modified and buttressed by his study of Mauron, provided a strong theoretical justification for his disjunctive form. To resist the intelligence is, in Stevens' view, to preserve the potency of poetry, to maintain an interest in it as art against the destructive tendency of the intellect to reduce it to statement. Stevens' attitude toward explanation is, in effect, an early version of Susan Sontag's well-known argument in "Against Interpretation" that interpretation violates art: "To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world—in order to set up a shadow world of meanings.'"[22]

If this attitude has merit, it may help in a small way to account for the fact that a writer who is acknowledged as the least accessible of all modern poets has maintained the interest of a growing body of commentators and risen, as a recent assessment puts it, "to a commanding position as *the* modern American poet...."[23] It may also help to account for the fact that a study such as this which attempts to trace the ideas of "Man Carrying Thing" to their sources in Stevens' letters and Mauron's aesthetics is unable to exhaust the poem as poem. Stevens' and Mauron's ideas on the psychology of reader response are accessible to analysis outside the poem, but what is essential to the poem itself remains *almost* impervious to the intellect.

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NOTES

1. *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1954), p. 350.

2. 25 March 1941, *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1966), p. 388; hereafter cited as *Letters*.

3. Translated from the French by Roger Fry and Katherine John (London: The Hogarth Press, 1935). I wish to thank the Huntington Library for the opportunity to examine Stevens's private library and for permission to quote from notes in Stevens's books and from his unpublished letters.

4. Milton J. Bates, who has provided a valuable bibliography of the Stevens library, is a bit misleading whenhe states that Stevens "paraphrased Mauron's argument in the margins rather than marking salient passages" ("Stevens' Books at the Huntington: An Annotated Checklist," *Wallace Stevens Journal*, 2 [1978], 54). In fact, Stevens did both in addition to preparing a private index on the back fly and laying in a memo page of penciled notes.

5. "...I am neither a lecturer nor a troubadour," Stevens wrote to Allen Tate while he was working on "The Noble Rider" (Unpublished letter of 1 March 1941, Huntington Library).

6. This comment, broken into three phrases, appears on page 11, 12, and 13 of *Aesthetics and Psychology* beside a section where Mauron draws a distinction between the amateur like himself, whose duty is to enquire into his own reactions to art, and the scientist, whose business it is to find an explanation for the reaction.

7. The essence of Mauron's argument for the contemplative state of mind as the key to the "aesthetic emotion" may be found in Chapter V of *Aesthetics and Psychology*, pp. 31-38. Stevens's note is penciled in the margins of pages 31, 36, and 38.

8. See *Letters*, pp. 346-375.

9. 31 March 1928, *Letters*, p. 251.

10. 15 November 1935, *Letters, p. 294.*

*11. 9 January 1940, Letters*, pp. 346-347.

12. "This is a perfect instance of destroying a poem by explaining it" (*Letters*, p. 347). "Here again the explanation destroys the poem" (p. 348). "As I go on with the thing, I am a little horrified by it. Take, for instance, what I said yesterday about the monster. Certainly I never converted the monster into the sort of extension that you are looking for; I never said to myself that it was the world. These things are intact in themselves" (p. 361). "The poem is the poem, not its paraphrase" (p. 362).

13. 18 January 1940, *Letters*, p. 354.

14. It is impossible to determine exactly when Stevens read *Aesthetics and Psychology, which was published in 1935. It may be that he read it at the time he was responding to Simon's questions. However, it is more likely that this was one of the "two or three dozen books" he mentions to Henry Church in March 1941 while preparing the Princeton lecture. Certainly Mauron figures very heavily in the lecture, although Stevens may have re-read and marked it at that time.*

*15. Aesthetics and Psychology*, p. 60. Stevens underlines a number of passages in Chapter VIII, where this argument appears.

16. *Aesthetics and Psychology*, pp. 87-88.

17. *Aesthetics and Psychology*, p. 96.

18. *Aesthetics and Psychology*, pp. 100.

19. *Aesthetics and Psychology*, p. 104. Compare the conclusion of Stevens' late poem "The Planet on the Table" (*CP*, p. 532), where the speaker says of his poems:

> It was not important that they survive.
> What mattered was that they should bear
> Some lineament or character,
>
> Some affluence, if only half-perceived,
> In the poverty of their words.
> Of the planet of which they were part.
> (ll. 10-15)

20. *Aesthetics and Psychology, p. 100. Stevens expressed this same horror in a passage to Simons quoted above.*

*21. Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 168.

22. *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1961), p. 7.

23. William H. Pritchard, "Poet of the Academy," *The Southern Review*, 15 (1979), 851.

# A Reading of "Sea Surface Full of Clouds"

JOAN RICHARSON

In the fall of 1923, fourteen years after they were married, Wallace and Elsie Stevens took their first extended holiday together; in the summer of 1924, Holly Bright Stevens was born and "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" appeared.[1]. Until now considered the prime example of a "pure poem," "Sea Surface" is, quite the opposite, a recollection expressing the most intimate and concrete experience of the poet's "creating."

Possibly what we notice first on reading "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" is the repetition of the opening line in each of the five sections; we discover the most obvious clue to the poem's occasion. Stevens did not write, "In November off Tehuantepec," or "In a November off Tehuantepec," but, "In *that* November off Tuhuantepec." *That* points to the time of his daughter's conception (her birth date being August 10, 1924). That the Stevens actually saw Tehuantepec in late October, but that it is recorded as November reaffirms this poem as the cry memorializing this occasion. It leaves no doubt, since counting back nine months from August, we arrive at November (which conveniently names itself as the ninth month as well). In addition, there is a curious merging of the poet's perception with his wife's as he takes over her *November* 1st Journal entry, "The sea as flat and still as a pan-cake, before breakfast," and transforms it into all the seemings reflected in the poem. This in itself is a metaphor for what actually occurred: as they "rolled as one and from the two/Came fresh transfigurings of freshest blue" (in a later letter Stevens uses these same words, "freshest blue," to describe the color of his daughter's eyes). The repeated theme then "In that November off Tuhuantepec." is the constant strain holding, "...as a prelude holds and holds," the reader's attention throughout the poem.

Within the regularity of the preludial structure we note certain varying patterns of words. One, made up of "strategem," "cajoled," "sham," and "trumped" suggests trickery; another, consisting of "malevolent," "Macabre," "shrouds" (in one of its meanings), "shrouding shadows," "sinister," and "malice" suggests evil and mortality; yet another, "Paradisal green" and "ambrosial latitude" points to immortality and a connection with *Genesis*. In addition, two of the flowers named have pertinent associations to Greek mythology. And, we must also note the seemingly innocent "blooms" which beautifully hide their watery roots of meaning. Like "the clouds formed on the painter's newly varnished surface by an unexpected current of air"—one of the definitions of "blooms"—these poetic clouds hide, almost successfully, the details which are the "true subject." A second definition of "blooms" as a "hot sea wind" adds the element of reality—the actual wind whose effects Stevens describes. Also, the repeated use of the slightly varying French line in the same position in each of the sections. Though Stevens remarked in his *Adagia* that French and English constitute a single language, his sliding into this French phrasing nonetheless, manages to hide his "true subject" even more, since the reader tends to dismiss

the lines as most affected and dandified, and, therefore, removed utterances in the poem when, in fact, they are the most intimate and revealing.

The constant in each section is that the sea is stilled, suggesting that this time is an interlude, free of the exigencies of the "everyday world" which could distract the poet from observing what passes through his consciousness. Of the five equal sections, the first and last two frame the third, which describes a very particular night. The first two sections, depicting divisions of the morning, do not describe the morning of the day *before* that night, however, but the morning just *after* – as do the last two sections. The repeated "one night" in the second line of both the first and second sections points ahead to the "one night" which is the "true subject" of the poem, thus forecasting its importance. After the first two sections, the third then yields its meaning and eases our expectations. In the last two sections "one night" is not repeated; the tension has been relieved by our knowledge of what happened that night.

In the first section we have a rare portrait of the poet as satisfied and potent "Hoon." In later poetry, in "Planet on the Table," for example, we see the poet fulfilled, but by age and vision rather than by the vigor of manhood. We are intrigued by this image here, as we are by the series of seemingly strange juxtapositions that emerge within the regularity of the structure.

We ask ourselves, first, why the poet imagines "chocolate" and "umbrellas." The juxtaposition of the two is perplexing. Stevens seems to have anticipated our reaction: in the third line of the second stanza, he uses "perplexed" to describe the "machine/ Of ocean." The ocean is "perplexed" because of the stillness brought by the calm. "Which *like* limpid water lay" (emphasis mine) indicates that this is only an appearance, since this stillness is the motive force of the poet's imaginings. The perplexity belongs not only to us and to the sea, but to the poet as well. He is at sea in November, and it is summer. The label he is used to as signifying chill, grey weather now signifies "Paradisal green." The only activity is his imagination, which cannot help but associate. He looks at the deck of the ship, perhaps sipping his morning chocolate, and "thinks," or *thinks* he thinks, of "rosy chocolate" and "gilt umbrellas." The associations are to Homer's "rosy-fingered dawn," to Milton's sky opening Book V of *Paradise Lost*, to ideas of muddy chocolate rivers emptying into the sea on which he is sailing, to the ancestral Indians of Tehuantepec from whom the Old World settlers leaned of chocolate. These associations are extremely important since through them we uncover Stevens' "true subject."

We begin, then, with chocolate, a sweet delight, but bitter in its natural state. This situation is mirrored in Stevens' poetry, and paradigmatically in "Sea Surface," where the sweetness of the "poetry of the subject," almost completely belies the carnal reality of the "true subject."

The poet wishes for the shelter from the sun's heat and from what its full light promises to reveal. The poet, must protect himself; he cannot be in direct contact with this "paradisal" nature, so he invents umbrellas. Most obvious is the association announced by sound. Hearing the homonym of "gilt," we have "guilt umbrellas," beneath which the knowing poet hides himself, his "true subject," his sexuality.

He asks questions: "Who, then, in that abrosial latitude/ Out of the light evolved the moving blooms,/ Who, then, evolved the sea-blooms from the clouds/ Diffusing balm in that Pacific calm?" This is the poet of "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," feeling himself majestic, godlike, belonging to "that ambrosial latitude", creating "sea-blooms" from clouds as they move across the sky and shadow the sea. *Genesis* is strongly evoked here, where God's spirit, like the poet's imagination, moves over the face of the waters and creates form. When the poet answers his questions, he speaks of the power he feels, indirectly and so switches to French, *"C'était mon enfant, mon bijou, mon âme,"* giving a most concrete clue in a comparatively removed manner. After the creation of form, there is Paradise: "Paradisal green/ Gave suavity to the perplexed machine". The perplexed poet is soothed by intimations of immortality, ensured in his continuity in the flesh of his child. The open-endedness of this line, not completed until the next stanza with "Of ocean," lends the necessary ambiguity, allowing "machine" to point more strongly to the poet than to the ocean to which it grammatically belongs. It also reflects the ambiguity of the poet's situation at the time of writing the poem, since his memory is informed by the knowledge that his wife is pregnant, but reality is imcomplete, open-ended, as it will be until his child's birth.

As his imagined blooms move "in the swimming green," he sees them as "those flotillas" defending him against any external power or internal feeling that might rob him of those imaginings which memorialize his potency and joy. In the next line, the association of "iris" to Iris of Greek mythology connects with the hint of Homer we heard in "rosy chocolate." Iris' duty was to feed the gods ambrosia (another tie to "ambrosial latitude"); her union with Zephyrus, a personification of one of the winds, was believed by some to have produced Eros.

In the second section there are shifts in both mood and time. It is now well beyond the dawn of Section I. The opening lines remain unchanged, forcing the return to the "true subject" he cannot avoid—that "one night." Here, with the sun rising higher in the sky, less evasion is possible, so an element of doubt appears, together with hints of evil and mortality. The tone is now controlled by primarily negative or, at least, ambivalent, feelings. The poet is preoccupied with the more problematic aspects of his situation.

He thinks of "chop-house chocolate and sham umbrellas." The first association carries out the suggestion of breakfast, since a chop-house is an eating place. That it is a kind of eating place frequented by those who must eat away from home suggests that the poet is subliminally aware of the time before his marriage, or to the times after, when he had travelled without Elsie. "Sham" indicates that something is awry. The poet is conscious of some kind of trickery or covering up, either on his or his wife's part, or on his imagination's part as it derives substantial images from the play of light and shadow. This continues with the shift from "Paradisal" to "sham-like green," and with the fact that he no longer percieves "summer," but "summer-seeming," which suggests that he is more conscious of providing effects which are not real.

With this realization he becomes "tense," and projects his feeling onto the

"machine/ Of ocean" which now "in sinister flatness lay." He again beholds the movement of the clouds. He does not immediately see them as "blooms," however, but as *themselves*, "that strode submerged in the malevolent sheen." Evil is indicated with two of the five words suggesting it already presented. The ocean now threatens him; his imagined "flotillas" can no longer defend him against his feelings connected, as they are at this point, with thoughts of his mortality: "Who saw the *mortal* [emphasis mine] massives of the blooms/ of water moving on the water-floor?/ *C'était mon frère du ceil, ma vie, mon or.*" He can see more clearly; the sun is higher. His imagination no longer sustains him; he, too, is dependent on the power of nature. The sun is her "frère du ceil".

The next stanza introduces the first explicit auditory element: "The gongs rang loudly as the windy booms/ Hoo-hooed it in the darkened ocean-blooms. / The gongs grew still." The intrusion of exterior reality echoes the poet's turning to things more real. The gong's belong to the ship or to a buoy rocking in the swell. Perhaps they announce the call to breakfast, or, perhaps they sound as the wind rises. In either case, they signal the end of the illusions that were part of the still, "malevolent sheen." The wind clears the sky of clouds: "And then blue heaven spread/ Its crystalline pendentives on the sea/ And the macabre of the water-glooms/ In an enormous undulation fled." The umbrella imagery is now projected onto the sky with its raying sunshine suggesting pendatives supporting arches. Here, all of Stevens' imagery connected with palms and their archings, signifying the peace found by the mind, is evoked. His rational mind is operating and sees as "water-glooms" what the imagination saw as "sea-blooms." The force of the mind, symbolized by the forces of sun and wind, allows him to see things clearly.

The penultimate line, "And the macabre of the water-glooms," conceals the key to the meaning of this section. "Macabre" comes from its application to the medieval *danse macabre*, traditionally a series of twenty-four depictions of the soul and its being on their way to death. Now we understand the musical structure of the poem; it is the music for this dance. If one section of the poem is omitted, there are twenty-four stanzas; which section should be deleted so that the remainder stands as a new *danse* will become clear shortly. At this point, we must first ask why the associations to mortality, evil and trickery are in this second section, immediately following the peace of the first.

The *danse macabre* was a religiously inspired answer and foil to vanity. In the first section the poet reveled in his power to create a child and in his power to create variety out of nature's indifference. As an inheritor of the Calvinist spirit, Stevens could not maintain this feeling of peace and power without some guilt ("gilt umbrellas"). He could not escape from some feeling that an act of unmitigated pleasure was evil, "sinister" and "malevolent." The poet seems to develop Augustine's borrowed observation that, "Post Coitum , homo tristis est." Afterwards, comes the intense awareness of mortality.

Now we come to Section III where there is no day, only night – a night of intensest blue, complete with a moon which is not named but whose presence is known by the shadowed images its light evokes. "And a pale silver patterned

on the deck/ and made one think of porcelain chocolates and pied umbrellas." The adjectives suggest both the delicacy and playfullness of the experiences described in this section. Here is the last time "one night" will be mentioned since it is for this section that the indications in the preceding two exist.

The "green" is now "uncertain". The poet, too, feels uncertain; his wife may or may not. The symbolization of the poet-with-imagination is "green;" "green" functions synechdochally, suggesting the "green and fluent mundo," and the "fat girl, green and terrestial" of "Notes." It is "piano-polished" not only because it appears glimmering but also because of his associations to pianos – his mother having played and Elsie as well when he met her and she worked playing the piano in a Reading department store. For him, the piano and other keyboard instruments are always attached to something magical connected with the idea of beauty and the allure of the female, as, for example, in "Peter Quince at the Clavier." Accordingly, the machine of ocean, his projection, is now "tranced," carried away by the rapture of the "uncertain green... as a prelude holds and holds."

"Prelude" continues the metaphor begun with "piano-polished," reinforcing the musical structure, and also describes most hermetically the period preceding sexual climax. He imaginatively records both his sensations and those of his wife. The female is felt by him as "silver petals of white blooms/ Unfolding in the water," and he, in his maleness, is "feeling sure/ of the milk within the saltiest spurge." He goes on to express the feelings of both of them throughout this section and in part of the next. The climax itself is described as, "The sea unfolding in the sunken clouds/ Oh! [marking the surprise of the moment of climax] *C'était mon extase et mon amour.*" Unlike the previous two sections, he does not now *see* the sea-blooms; his attention is not focused on what is external; he only hears the sea: "heard, then,/ The sea unfolding in the sunken clouds."

Following the established pattern, the section moves on and the poet describes, "So deeply sunken were they that the shrouds, / The shrouding shadows, made the petals black/ Until the rolling heaven made them blue,/ A blue beyond the rainy hyacinth,/ And smiting the crevasses of the leaves/ Deluged the ocean with a/ sapphire blue." During the moment of climax they feel "deeply sunken," like the sea-blooms themselves. The petals are now black, color of "La petite mort." When he and Elsie again become aware of their surroundings; they perceive a blue associated with immortality (suggested by the reference to Hyacinth). They also realize their temporary union with the "rolling heaven" with which he "Deluged the ocean with a sapphire blue."

The only suggestions of mortality here are "shrouds" and shrouding shadows" which refer both to the winding cloth of death (as association generated by the French name for sexual climax which, in turn, is plausible because of Stevens' cryptic use of French in the poem) and to the actual shrouds of the ship which throw their shadows in the moonlight. The ambiguous "they" in the first line of the penultimate stanza refers both to the sea-blooms and to themselves (the sea-blooms are not referred to as "they" before this) as they move in harmony with the sea's rhythm.

This section differs from the other four in recording a present without reflection. The present participles, "seeing," "feeling," "unfolding" replace the past tenses of "evolved," "beheld," "moved," "strode," and "secluded." The poet is simultaneously acting and perceiving, caught in the passion of his act as he describes what informs the whole poem. It is this section which is to be deleted from the poem considered as a *danse macabre*, since here there is no separation of body and soul, between reason and imagination. All here is one, and is the occasion for the other meditations and observations of change. Following the *Genesis* imagery, the poet is now like Adam and Eve before the Fall; he has made the transition from creator to created.

The last two sections reflect a marked change in mood from the first two, even though they describe the *same* morning after. The account of that "one night" brings about this change. The poet no longer has a need to mention the "one night" since the knowledge of the experience has been internalized by him and by the reader. This was not known, only hinted at, before the third and central section.

In the first stanza of Section IV the change is immediately reflected in the abrupt alteration of the second line, from "The slopping of the sea grew still one night," to, "The night-long slopping of the sea grew still." This leaves us with a feeling of hesitation and impatience parallel to the poet's, whose earlier state of peace has been interrupted. He cannot be the same now because he has revealed himself to us and to himself, and he is somewhat ashamed. He has fallen. Instead of alluding to Homer's dawn, he now speaks entirely in his own voice. He describes the dawn: "A mallow morning dozed upon the deck/ And made one think of musky chocolate/ And frail umbrellas." Besides suggesting the color of the flower it names, "mallow" also hints at "mellow." Things appear soft and unclear, and the adjectives communicate this sense. The poet feels vulnerable and afraid and wants to hide—like Adam and Eve.

"A too-fluent green/ Suggested malice in the dry machine/ Of ocean, pondering dank stratagem:" these lines point out the reason for his fear. The green is no longer "paradisal," "sham-like," or even "uncertain." but "too-fluent;" it has over expended itself. It overpowers his potency, his imagination, subjugating it to reality. Imagination need not complete life when life is complete in itself. At the same time, this suggest "malice in the dry machine" that he is now, having spent his "saltiest spurge," because he, good Puritan, cannot accept the satisfaction of his flesh without a sense of sin. In addition, since he must have played at seducing his wife, must have "cajoled" her, planned like a general his "strategem" to win her, he feels guilty for this as well. Besides the characters of God and Adam, he has taken on that of Satan, the tempter. He characterizes himself as "pondering dark strategem;" he thinks to alleviate the pangs he feels. He looks at the "figures of the clouds" and sees them, like Elsie and himself, reenacting the primal shame of Adam and Eve, "*secluded* in the thick marine," [emphasis mine], hiding themselves.

The suggestion of God's presence represented in the same words which describe the poet and experience indicates that the poet is torn between his animality and what he has internalized of God's punishing nature. The God in

him is "pondering dark stratagem" as punishment, at the same time as the serpent in him is "pondering dark strategem" to cause his fall into consciousness. God's "presence" grows out of the poet's sense of shame. God internalized by the poet sees him and Elsie identified with the "blooms... secluded in the thick marine." *Ma foi, la nonchalance divine*" carries out this suggestion of God's presence. since the poet has, at least, a vestige of the faith he was raised with, he still somehow believes in the "nonchalant" (because uncaring of human pain) divinity whose image of "salt masks of beard" grows out of the shameful "nakedness of which he suddenly becomes aware, as do Adam and Eve after the Fall. The ambivalence of the images in this section reflects the strain between the poet's animal and spiritual natures—a tension the can never be eased. The strength of the controlling myth of Genesis is reiterated.

But the associations suddenly shift in the middle of this imagery; the "blooms" become "damasks that were shaken off/ From the loosed girdles in the spangling must." The poet imagines Elsie as a goddess undressing, like Iris shaking loose the colors of the rainbow from her girdle, and he remembers both of them caught in the "spangling must" of animal desire. The tension between his animal and spiritual natures is even greater. What in one sense is the punishing nature, *"ma foi, la nonchalance divine,"* is also what allows him to have this memory. This represents a temporary lack of concern with how Elsie might now feel and a momentary lapse of his own guilt. It reminds us, too, that Stevens leaned toward Greek mythology. This is also coupled with a renewed desire for faith in imagination, which he needs to sustain him. This provides the possibility for continuing, even into the next stanza which is *wholly* imaginary, characterized as such by the repetition of "would:"

> The nakedness would rise and suddenly turn
> Salt masks of beard and mouths of bellowing,
> Would—But more suddenly the heaven rolled.

Imagination operates differently here; it is connected with *thought*, with the actively-ordering faculty which attemps to *impose* meaning on experience. We are now wholly within the mind of the poet, not even half-connected to the external reality from which he has previously drawn the impressions mirroring his feelings. This lasts for only a moment, however, until, "—But more suddenly the heaven rolled// Its bluest sea-clouds in the thinking green,/ And the nakedness became the broadest blooms,/ Mile-mallows that a mallow sun cajoled." Before the intrusion of these lines the poet had revealed himself openly for the first time, in his nakedness, his vulnerability, for the first time not using his images as defenses, as his "flotilla" protecting him against the invasion of his feelings. but he quickly checks himself. If he could, he "would" see in the sea the mirror of his own being, "Salt masks of beard and mouths of bellowing," but then he would have had to have written a poem about that joyful suffering, having *it* his stated subject rather than his impressions of the sea surface. As it is, we only sense the poet's real feelings for a few seconds.

What has occurred—this lapse into a direct examination of himself and his condition—results from his having turned his imagination inward *together*

*with his thought* and is confirmed by the final modification of green by "thinking." His attention has again been caught by the play of light on the sea; he again creates sea-blooms, his defenses. Instead of contemplating his "nakedness," he imagines again, "the broadest blooms, / Mile-mallows that a mallow sun cajoled." The description is not as variously imaginative as it was earlier; "mallow" repeated as plural noun and as adjective in the same line (echoing the first stanza of the section) suggests that the poet is nolonger able to use his imagination freely. He is now repressing what *would* be his "true subject," and the repetitions reflect his resulting staleness. He is no longer able to be the passive observer of his imagination as he was in the first section, when he did not have to defend himself against expressing the genuine feelings tied to his intimate life. He "cajoles" his imagination to focus itself again on the sea, but it is too late. Both we and he know that the sea surface is not and has not been his "true subject."

The last section sums up. The variation of the second line of the first stanza counterpoises night and day on either side of the line, symbolically informing us that it was that "one night" which stilled the sea and so was responsible for the poet's imaginings. The enjambed "the day" at the end of the line prepares us for more lucidity, more "light of day" rationality, less moonlike imagining. It is as though the poet suddenly has realized that up until now his imaginings of the light have been conditioned by that "one night" — that is, on the deck of the ship during that "morning after," he acted in the way he acted only at night, alone in his room, allowing his imagination full rein. But now, thought (consciousness after the Fall) has intruded, his knowledge cannot be hidden, so he looks at things clearly.

He describes how, "The day/ Came bowing and voluble, upon the deck." The comparison is no longer concrete and imaginative, but abstract and rational, based on an intellectually constructed analogy paralleling the day to a clown. The day is a "good clown" because it brings the return of reason and allows him to feel more familiar with himself again, to see himself like the day and like the sea as well, as a clown, who out of an enormous amount of control and effort can make it appear that he is only playing — just as he has done in the poem.

We recognize the poet of the early poems of *Harmonium* because of the ironic tone which has been markedly absent from the rest of the poem, but which now makes itself heard. The poet is again playing the dandy, the aesthete, separated from real feeling, thinking of "Chinese chocolate and large umbrellas." He is not really paying attention to what he sees in his memory, but letting fancy associate wittily. The green is now "motley" like the imaginary clown's clothing. Like the ocean onto which he projects his characteristics, he is now "obese," feeling the weight of his body because he is fully in reality. What was beautifully peaceful in the first section is now "perfected in indolence."

He cannot now extend the moment of his satisfaction beyond the opening section when he was still un-selfconscious about what had gone on during the night. Moreover, he creates that persona, that "pistache one, ingenious and droll," who sees the world colored by his attitude of green (through "pistache")

irony which protects him from self-knowledge and consequent revelation. Instead of his soul, he observes "the sovereign clouds as jugglery// And the sea as turquoise-turbaned Sambo, neat/ At tossing saucers", like himself, distracting attention from where it had been focused. He names this, *"mon esprit bâtard, l'ignominie,"* quite correctly because he knows that it is out of his shame, his inability to sustain pleasure and describe it openly, that the image of sea-blooms, chocolate and umbrellas—the apparent subjects of the poem—grow. It is a bastard spirit because it does not allow him to know who he really is.

The final two stanzas describe how the clouds finally come together: "The sovereign clouds came clustering." Then we have the rather cryptic line, "The conch of loyal conjuration trumped." Though it does not *seem* to refer to anything in this section, it actually explains the context of the whole poem. His ability to conjure (as clown-trickster, the "sleight-of-hand man") has trumped us into mistaking the "poetry of the subject" for the "true subject." It has even tricked the poet himself, making him the real victim of the artifice. Ultimately, the wind clears away the clouds, and there is an ambiguously successful ending to the poem: "Then the sea/ And heaven rolled as one and from the two/ Came fresh transfigurations of the freshest blue." "Then" refers both to the moment the poem closes when reality and the clear light of the sun have made "fresh transfigurations" possible, and also *back* to the second half of the third section when the clouds and heaven rolled as one with the poet and his wife and produced, "A blue beyond the rainy hyacinth." Because of this double reference, these lines assume a mimicking quality since what we do when we read both the hidden "true subject" and the apparent "poetry of the subject" is to make "fresh transfigurings." And what the poet and his wife produced from this momentary union resulted from their being like the sea and heaven described in the poem, "rolled as one."

In closing, I offer the following observations taken from "The Irrational Element in Poetry:" "One is always writing about two things at the same time in poetry and it is this that produces the tension characteristic of poetry. One is the true subject and the other is the poetry of the subject. The difficulty of sticking to the true subject, when it is the poetry of the subject that is paramount in one's mind, need only be mentioned to be understood."

NOTES

1. In *Dial*, LXXVII (July, 1924), 51-4. "Red Loves Kit" (OP, 30) which appeared in *Measure*, 42 (August, 1924), can be considered a companion piece to this poem. Read in this way it reconfirms the meaning presented here as the "true subject."

# Wallace Stevens and Zen

ROBERT AITKEN

I think it would be fair to say that certain Asian vapors were part of Stevens' Hartford, but they were faint. He had a Buddhist image in his room, sent by a friend in Ceylon, which he liked because it was "so simple and explicit" (L. 328). He admitted to influence by "Chinese and Japanese lyrics" in one letter, and denied the importance of such influence in another (L. 813 & note). Buddhism itself is not mentioned once in his letters, unless we count a passing reference to "Buddha and Jesus" (L. 632).

Nonetheless, there is a profound relationship between Stevens' work and the teachings of Zen Buddhism. The ground of this relationship is "A mind of winter," where there is no intellectual overlay to obscure things as they are:

> One must have a mind of winter
> To regard the frost and the boughs
> Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;
>
> And have been cold a long time
> to behold the junipers shagged with ice,
> And spruces rough in the distant glitter
>
> Of the January sun; and not to think
> Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
> In the sound of a few leaves,
>
> Which is the sound of the land
> Full of the same wind
> That is blowing in the same bare place
>
> For the listener, who listens in the snow,
> And, nothing himself, beholds
> Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is. (9)

The title of this poem, "The Snow Man," refers not to a construction of snow with two pieces of coal for eyes, but rather to a man who has become snow. A snowman is a child's construction; a Snow Man is a unique human being with "a mind of winter," or, as Yasutani Hakuun Roshi used to say, "A mind of white paper." Many Zen stories point to this same mind:

> A monk asked Tung-shan, "When cold and heat visit us, how may we avoid them?"
>
> Tung-shan said, "Why not go where there is neither cold nor heat?"

The monk asked, "Where is there neither cold nor heat?"

Tung-shan said, "When it is cold, the cold kills you. When it is hot, the heat kills you."[1]

"Killed with cold" is to "have been cold a long time." That is the place where there is neither cold nor heart as concepts. When it is cold, one shivers. When it is hot, one sweats. There is just cold, or just heat, with no mental or emotional associations "in the sound of the wind,/In the sound of a few leaves."

The ultimate experience of perception of "pine-trees crusted with snow," or of "the sound of the wind," is the explicit sense that there is only that phenomenon in the whole universe; as Stevens expresses it: "the sound of the wind... is the sound of the land." This is the nature of seeing or hearing for the Snow Man, perception by the self which has been killed with cold. It is the mind of white paper that is confirmed by that sight, that sound. Dogen wrote, "That the ten thousand things advance and confirm the self is enlightenment."[2] In other words, it is that form, that sound, which make up my substance. "I am what is around me" (86).

Yun-men said to his assembly, "Each of you has your own light. If you try to see it, you cannot. The darkness is dark, dark. Now, what is your light?"

Answering for his listeners, he said, "The storeroom, the gate."[3]

In maintaining a mind of winter, Yun-men finds his light. There is nothing to be called the self except its experience of the storeroom, the gate, and the junipers shagged with ice. "The soul, he said, is composed /Of the external world" (51).

But when the mind is sicklied-over with concepts of the wind as a howling human voice, then also clouds are faces, "Oak Leaves Are Hands" (272), and the self perversely advances and confirms the ten thousand things. This is projection, the opposite of true perception, and is, as Dogen says, delusion[4] — the fantasy of Lady Lowzen, "For whom what is was other things" (272). As Ching Ch'ing says, "Ordinary people are upside down, falling into delusion about themselves, and pursuing outside objects."[5] Presuming that our emotional concerns are the center, we project ourselves onto the wind and the leaves, smearing them with our feelings. We have not yet reached the place where there is neither cold nor heat. We fall into delusion about ourselves, and seek to enlarge that delusion by the pathetic fallacy. Stevens had great fun mocking such self-centered fantasy:

In the weed of summer comes this green sprout why.
The sun aches and ails and then returns halloo
Upon the horizon amid adult enfantillages. (462)

"Enfantillage" means child-play, or childishness. "Adult enfantillages" I would understand to refer to the ascription of human qualities to non-human things,

beginning with "why," the conceptual weed which takes us furthest from realization of things as they are, and continuing with the projection of aches of other silly business upon the sun. This is the imagination which is not grounded in a mind of winter, and is thus infantile.

Vital imagination has its roots in the bare place outside—which is "the same bare place/For the listener," a generative, not a nihilistic place. Yamada Koun Roshi says, "The common denominator of all things is empty infinity, infinite emptiness. but this infinite emptiness is full of possibilities."

Empty infinity and great potential, the nature of all things as realized by the mature Zen Buddhist, is also the vision of the Snow Man, with his mind of winter and his capacity to perceive vividly. Indeed, the final line of "The Snow Man," "nothing that is not there and the nothing that is," precisely evokes the heart of Zen teaching:

> For is no other than emptiness,
> Emptiness no other than form.[6]

This emptiness of all phenomena, including the self, is being uncovered in modern physics. What appears paradoxical emerges as the complementarity of the suchness and emptiness of all things. This the mind of winter perceives.

Dogen expressed this complementarity in experiential terms:

> Body and mind fall away!
> The fallen-away body and mind![7]

When body and mind fall away, the self is zero. The listener is "nothing himself" and thus experiences the "nothing that is not there," which is all things just as they are, with no associations—just "the junipers shagged with ice." With this perception, the great potential is fulfilled, and all things are the self: "The fallen-away body and mind!" That is the self as white paper filled with the sound of the wind and the sound of a few leaves.

Bodhidharma, who brought Dyuana Buddhism from India to China and is revered as the founding teacher of Zen, conveyed this same teaching:

> Emperor Wu of Liang asked Bodhidharma, "What is the first principle of the holy teaching?"
> Bodhidharma said, "Vast emptiness, nothing holy."[8]

"Vast emptiness" is not only the common denominator of all things, it is itself all things, all space, all time together—as Wu-men wrote:

> Before a step is taken, the goal is reached;
> Before the tongue is moved, the speech is
> finished.[9]

Stevens wrote, in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction:"

There was a muddy centre before we breathed,
There was a myth before the myth began,
Venerable and articulate and complete. (383)

This is as far as one can trace Stevens' credo as set forth in "The Snow Man," but "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," the companion of "The Snow Man" at their first publication, is, I feel, its completion (65). Hoon's descent "in purple," with its connotations of royalty, is the king-like nature of one who emerges from emptiness, like the Buddha rising from his profound experience under the Bodhi tree.

When I was a young lay student in a Japanese Zen monastery, I was surprised at the way the monks would seem to equate confidence with religious realization. Their dignity was regal when genuine, merely arrogant when false, but in both instances, quite contrary to the humble attitude I had previously associated with religion.

Stevens knew better. He would have appreciated D.T. Suzuki's translation of a line by Wu-men: "In royal solitude you walk the universe."[10] Professor Suzuki took liberties in using "royal" in this instance, for it does not appear in Wu-men's original Chinese.[11] I feel sure that he was projecting his own experience of empty potency here, and that he shared the vision of "mountain-minded Hoon" (121). Fully personalizing "the junipers shagged with ice" is to realize those junipers are none other than myself. "I was the world in which I walked" (65). Confirmed by all things, Hoon walked the universe in royal aloneness, "And there I found myself more truly and more strange" (65). One is reminded of words attributed to baby Buddha immediately after his birth, which Zen teachers are fond of quoting:

Above the heavens, below the heavens,
Only I, alone and revered.[12]

Thus in different epochs and in different cultures, Wallace Stevens and Bodhidharma and his successors present the potent emptiness. I do not know how this could be, but there it is, perhaps no more remarkable than that they had the same number of sense organs. As Nakagawa Soen Roshi once said, "We are all members of the same nose-hole society."

But I think we have here something far more significant than human beings expressing common humanity. We are touching the connection between a certain kind of poet and a certain kind of religion. Zen teachers from the very beginning peppered their discourses with quotations frm such poets as Tu Fu and Basho, poets who had little or no formal connection with Zen. Of course, Zen was a part of the cultural atmosphere of T'ang China or Tokugawa Japan, but Tu Fu and Basho were no more "Zen poets" than Stevens was. It is here that "the green sprout why" would take over our civilization if we let it. I am content to acknowledge Stevens as one of the very few great poets who will be a source of endless inspiration for future generations of Western Zen teachers.

## NOTES

References to Stevens' poetry are accompanied by the page number in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (N.Y.: Knopf, 1954). The abbreviation "L." followed by page number refers to *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, edited by Holly Stevens (N.Y.: Knopf, 1966). Unattributed translations are the author's.


1.*Hekiganroku* [Pi-yen Lu], trans. Koun Yamada and Robert Aitken, unpublished ms., Diamond Sangha, Honolulu & Haiku, Maui, Hawaii. Cf. J.C. & Thomas Cleary, trans., *The Blue Cliff Record*, 3 vols. (Boulder & London: Shambhala, 1978), II, 306.

2. Dogen Kigen, *"Genjokoan," Honzanhan Shukusatsu Shobogenzo* (Tokyo: Komeisha, 1968), p. 24. Cf. Hakuyu Taizan Maezumi, trans., *The Way of Everyday Life* (Los Angeles: Center Publications, 1978), n.p.

3. *Hekiganroku;* cf. Cleary, *The Blue Cliff Record*, III, 554.

4. Dogen Kigen, *"Genjokoan,"* p. 24. Df. Maezumi, *The Way of Everyday Life*, n.p.

5. *Hekiganroku;* cf. Cleary, *The Blue Cliff Record*, I, 176.

6. *"Prajna Paramita Hridaya Sutra," Daily Sutras of the Diamond Sangha*, mimeo., Honolulu & Haiku, Maui, Hawaii. Cf. D.T. Suzuki, *Manual of Zen Buddhism* (N.Y.: Grove, 1960), p. 26.

7. *Denkoroku*, trans. Koun Yamada & Robert Aitken, unpublished ms., Diamond Shangha, Honolulu & Haiku, Maui, Hawaii.

8. Hekiganroku; cf. Cleary, *The Blue Cliff Record*, I, 1.

9. *Mumonkan;* cf. Shibayama, *Zen Comments on the Mumonkan*, p. 326.

10. D.T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhims*, second series (London: Rider, 1950), p. 248.

11. *Mumonkan* cf. Shibayama, *Zen Comments on the Mumonkan*, p. 10.

12. Robert Aitken. *A Zen Wave: Basho's Haiku and Zen* (N.Y. & Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1978), p 84.


Variations on a Theme by Wallace Stevens, from an Examination in English 275 (or, Papers Full of Clouds)

1) "Peter Quince at the Caviar"
2) "Peter the Calaver"
3) "the Prince at the Cavalier"


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# The Calculated Failures of "Prologues to What Is Possible"

JEROME GRISWOLD

One of the most difficult things to identify in Wallace Stevens' poetry is his tone, that is, his intentions. Some critics, for example, regard "The Snow Man" as a serious poem, while others like Samuel French Morse regard it an "elaborate hoax."[1] Joseph Riddel believes *The Rock* shows Stevens at his most genuine, while Marjorie Perloff believes it reveals Stevens' irony[2]. And Daniel Fuchs means to correct the gravity of much of Stevens criticism when he writes of *The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens*.[3]

An understanding of "Prologues to What Is Possible" depends upon an accurate identification of Stevens' tone and intentions. For the most part, critics have approached the poem in a reverential manner; and I think I can say, with only a little exaggeration, that they believe it recounts something like the voyage of an Existential Sailor who is bound for the Mystic Isles where, wrapped in the folds of his gown, he will grapple with what Self is snarling in him for discovery.

I certainly read the poem in this fashion for some time until I noticed certain resemblances between it and a chapter in Santayana's *Scepticism and Animal Faith*. Now, I think I can say with some confidence that "Prologues to What Is Possible" provides a specimen of the worst kind of sublime poetry, that it is riddled with compositional errors, and that if it were submitted in a writing class the instructor would hoot in the margins: "Logic!" "*Non Sequitur!*" "Coherence!" and the like. Stevens would have anticipated this. "Prologues to What is Possible" is full of Stevens' calculated failures.

The relationship between Stevens and Santayana has long been a subject of scholarly discussion. Stevens met Professor Santayana when he was an undergraduate at Harvard, and in his later life Stevens acquired all the philosopher's books and wrote admiringly of Santayana in his letters and essays. So, too, scholars have traced the influence of Santayana upon Stevens' poetry.[4] It would not be surprising then, if Stevens drew upon Santayana's writings, as he drew upon the writings of others, for inspiration in the writing of a poem.

"Prologues to What Is Possible" makes use of the thirteenth chapter of what philosophers regard as Santayana's best book—*Scepticism and Animal Faith* (1923).[5] In that chapter Santayana considers what evidence there is to warrant belief in the existence of a thinking mind; or, to say this differently, Santayana goes Descartes one better and, before concluding "I think therefore I am," wonders philosophically what proof can be found that "I think."

Santayana finds evidence of a thinking mind in the progressive discourse of rhetoric and mathematics. To reason through a syllogism or to follow an equation to its conclusion involves such things as coherent intent, choice, self-correction, and the like; and all these offer proof of the existence of adventitious

mental life. But while rhetoric and mathematics provide Santayana with the clearest way to describe *what* thought is, they do not provide him with the most vivid proof *that* it exists. The most dramatic evidence Santayana finds is mental flatfoodedness; the creakings and failures of mental machinery are the loudest witnesses to the existence of thought. In this regard, Santayana mentions contradiction and stammering as two dramatic testaments to the presence of mental life.

> The round square is an essence of comic discourse, actualized when, having confused names, definitions and ideas, a fumbling or an impudent mind sets about to identify two incompatibles; and this attempt is no more impossible to a mind—which is subject to animal vapours—than it is impossible for such a mind to look for a lost word. The psyche has the lost word in store, as it has the intuitions of the circle and square; but the loss of memory or the confusion of ideas may arise not withstanding, because the movement in discourse which should culminate in those intuitions may be intercepted mechanically, and arrested at a stage where the name is not yet recovered, or where the words circle and square have fused their associations and are striving to terminate in the intuition of both as one. Such stammerings and contradictions make evident the physical basis of thought. (SAF 121-122)

And it is these two forms of mental flatfootedness that provide the basis for the first section of Stevens' "Prologues to What Is Possible."

The poem begins, innocently enough, with a comparison:

> There was an ease of mind that was like being alone in a boat at sea,
> A boat carried forward by waves resembling the bright backs of rowers,
> Gripping their oars, as if they were sure of the way to their distination,
> Bending over and pulling themselves erect on the wooden handles,
> Wet with water and sparkling in the one-ness of their motion.

But in the second stanza the poem drifts on to the shoals of contradiction:

> The boat was built of stones that had lost their weight and being no
> longer heavy
> Had left in them only a brilliance, of unaccustomed origin,
> So that he that stood up in the boat leaning and looking before him
> Did not pass like someone voyaging out of and beyond the familiar.

Stevens' own version of the round square (the attempt of "a fumbling or an impudent mind... to identify two incompatibles") are his marvels of shipbuilding and geology: a boat made of stones, and stones that are weightless and brilliant. And as if to round out this collection of contradictions, Stevens ends with a *non sequitur*: that the person aboard this most exceptional craft "did *not* pass like someone voyaging out of and beyond the familiar."

From contradiction, Stevens turns in the next stanza to another form of mental flatfootedness—stammering:

He belonged to a the far-foreign departure of his vessel and was part
 of it,
Part of the speculum of fire on its prow, its symbol, whatever it was,
Part of the glass-like sides on which it glided over the salt-stained water,
As he traveled alone, like a man lured on by a syllable without
 any meaning,
A syllable of which he felt, with an appointed sureness,
That it contained the meaning into which he wanted to enter,
A meaning which, as he entered it, would shatter the boat and leave
 the oarsmen quiet
As at a point of central arrival, an instant moment, much or little,
Removed from any shore, from any man or woman, and needing none.

The creation of metaphor is a search for the resemblance that "clicks"; as Santayana says, "there is a postulate that in transcendent intent I am hitting a hidden target" (SAF 119). Stammering is the interruption of this process before that "click" occurs; as an example, Santayana speaks of the mind looking for a lost word: "the psyche has the lost word in store... but [because of] the loss of memory... [the movement of thought is] intercepted mechanically, and arrested at a stage where the name is not yet recovered." this is the situation of the "he" in Stevens' poem. He is searching for the syllable tht will "click," a syllable that he feels, "with an appointed sureness," contains "the meaning into which he wanted to enter... As at a point of central arrival." But he does not arrive; he is "like a man lured on by a syllable" that is on the tip of his tongue.

Stevens' mental bumblings serve a purpose: "such stammerings and contradictions," Santayana says, "make evident the physical basis of thought." But there is, according to Santayana, an even louder witness than these to the existence of mental life:

> This witness is error. Thought becomes obvious when things betray it; as they cannot have been false, something else must have been so, and this something else, which we call thought, must have existed and must have had a different status from that of the thing it falsified. Error thus awakens even the laziest philosophy. (SAF 123)

This is the point at which the second part of Stevens' poem begins:

The metaphor stirred his fear. The object with which he was compared
Was beyond his recognizing. By this he knew that likeness of
 him extended
Only a little way, and not beyond, unless between himself
And things beyond resemblance there was this and that intended
 to be recognized,
The this and that in the enclosures of hypotheses
On which men speculated in summer when they were half asleep.

This passage constitutes a transition. Stevens is awakened by error and ac-

knowledges the failures of his poem thus far. Thought has satisfied things; the object with which the "he" of the poem has been compared — the unusual boat made of weightless and brilliant stones — is, he concedes, beyond recognition. The trouble is in the way this metaphor excedes fact. It is as is if Stevens has provided an example of his dictum that "the imagination loses its vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real" (NA 6); or, to use a term Stevens uses in another poem, "the celestial possible," he has created a metaphor that is more celestial than possible.

When Stevens adds, "By this he knew that likeness of him extended/ Only a little way, and not beyond," he means that by this error he has also discovered what is possible; hence, the title of the poem. The possible is not the mind untethered, not whatever is imaginable. Instead, it is that more proximate realm, free of self-contradiction, where the imaginable is still in touch with the actual.[6] In Stevens' vocabulary it is where reality and the imagination are interdependent. Or, in Santayana's words, dialectic is "a two-edged sword": on the other hand, if valid, it involves a world over which though may range, and on the other hand it involves the existence of thought itself — which is a name for the fact that part of of the world has been "chosen for perusal, considered at leisure,... and recognized as having this or that articulation" (SAF 120); so, in a remarkably similar fashion, Stevens says, "between himself/ And things beyond resemblance there was this and that intended to be recognized, / The this and that in the enclosures of hypotheses/ On which men speculated in summer when they were half asleep."

Contradiction, stammering, error — these are loud witnesses Santayana finds to warrant belief in a thinking mind. They lead Stevens to the same conclusion as "Prologues to What Is Possible" continues:

> What self, for example, did he contain that had not yet been loosed,
> Snarling in him for discovery as his attentions spread,
> As if all this hereditary lights were suddenly increased
> By an access of color, a new and unobserved, slight dithering,
> The smallest lamp, which added its puissant flick, to which he gave
> A name and privilege over the ordinary of his commonplace —

The two metaphors Stevens uses to describe this newly discovered self are drawn from Santayana's own metaphors. The "snarling" creature "that had not yet been loosed" seems to be taken from Santayana's figure for the mind as the impetus "animal life which underlies discourse" (SAF 121). And the dithering lamp which is given privilege over the commonplace appears to come from Santayana's intuition now along this path and now that in a field posited as static; and it is a "dithering" lamp and a "puissant flick" that is discovered "as his attentions spread" because Santayana had observed that this light of intuition "can hardly be prolonged without winking... [because of the] coming and going of attention, in flashes and varied assaults" (SAF 120).

With the snarling creature and the dithering lamp Stevens has happened upon metaphors that are recognizable, that are possible, in the way that his metaphor of the unworldly boat made of unworldly stones is not. As the poem con-

cludes, Stevens adds more of these recognizable and possible metaphors when he continues describing what is brought to life by the discovery of this puissant flick, this self —

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

These three metaphors are, of course, allusions to other poems in *The Rock* where the discovery of self is also celebrated: "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself" ("The way some first thing coming into Northern trees/ Adds to them the whole vocabulary of the south"), "One of the Inhabitants of the West" ("The way the earliest single light in the evening sky, in spring,/ Creates a fresh universe out of nothingness by adding itself"), and "Note on Moonlight" ("The way a look or touch reveals its unexpected magnitudes"). And it is by this cross-referencing that a solution can be found to the riddle Stevens leaves in the poem when, speaking of his boat, he mentions "the speculum of fire on its prow, its symbol, whatever it was." The answer, of course, is to be found in that poem Stevens wrote as a tribute to Santayana, "To an Old Philosopher in Rome," where he speaks again of the "puissant flick" as —

> A light on the candle tearing against the wick
> To join a hovering excellence, to escape
> From fire and be part only of that of which
>
> Fire is the symbol: the celestial possible.

"Prologues to What Is Possible," then is a poem of mental flatfootedness and calculated failures. By means of contradiction, stammering, and error Stevens discovers, as Santayana said he might, the existence of a self.

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## NOTES

1. Samuel French Morse, *Wallace Stevens: Poetry as Life* (New York, 1970), p. 118.
2. Joseph Riddel, *The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens* (Baton Rouge, 1965), pp. 224-267. Marjorie Perloff, "Irony in Wallace Stevens' *The Rock*," *American Literature*, XXXVI (November 1964), 327-342.
3. (Durham, N.C., 1963).
4. See Jerome Griswold, "Santayana on Memory and 'The World as Meditation,'" *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, Vol. 3, nos. 3 & 4 (Fall 1979), p. 116, n. 1.
5. George Santayana, *Scepticism and Animal Faith: An Introduction to a System of Philosophy* (New York, 1923). References to this work appear parenthetically preceded by the designation "SAF".
6. *Scepticism and Animal Faith* provided an introduction and outline for the system Santayana was to expand and discuss in greater length in the four volumes of *Realms of Being* (*The Realm of Essence* — 1927, *of Matter* — 1930, *of Truth* — 1938, and *of Spirit* — 1940) and that later appeared as a one-volume edition (New York, 1942). Santayana discusses the accurate use of the word "possible" in pp. 26-28.

# Teasing the Reader into HARMONIUM

ROBERT BUTTEL

To enter the world of *Harmonium* — indeed, the Whole of Harmonium, Wallace Stevens' poetry generally — is to become detached from one's customary field of expectations and to undergo a testing of one's perceptions and assumptions. The response to a Stevens poem usually begins with disorientation and bafflement. The fact that *Harmonium* when it appeared in 1923 plunged for a time into near oblivion suggests that very few readers were ready for such a demanding experience. Consider what it must have been like reading the poems in that volume without the advantage we have of nearly sixty years of scholarship and criticism. We cannot rehearse precisely that early encounter, but we can, with that encounter in mind, consider the experience of entering the exceptional poetic domain Stevens created for his readers, using as a relatively limited and manageable example the ten short poems which open *Harmonium* and lead up to the longer and more demanding "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle." Only the accumulated practice in reading Stevens allows us to go further than those early readers in our response to these poems and to gain some comprehension of how the individual poems and their arrangement work. One of the chief delights, even for a reader familiar with Stevens, lies in the active play of mind required by the virtuosity of these poems, by their mercurial movement and diversity of effect, and by the process of reading through them in sequence.

The ten poems are, in order, "Earthy Anecdote," "Invective against Swans," "In the Carolinas," "The Paltry Nude Starts on a Spring Voyage," "The Plot against the Giant," "Infanta Marina," "Domination of Black," "The Snow Man," "The Ordinary Women," and "The Load of Sugar-Cane." These titles tantalize. Intriguingly disparate, they share a make-believe, playful unexpectedness as they draw the reader into unfamiliar poetic territory. The poems themselves raise the question of what tactics Stevens would seem to have had in mind for leading readers into his book, where they come upon such sophisticated, precise and yet such enigmatic and obscure poems, with meanings that hover on the edge of disclosure while remaining elusive. New readers are likely to be struck by the strangeness of these poems, by their idiosyncratic vocabulary, and by such exotica as a firecat, a paltry nude, peacocks, unordinary ordinary women undergoing some bizarre ritual in a mysterious palatial setting, and a red-turbaned boatman his headdress interjecting a note of the East in the American setting indicated by the saw grass and killdeer. But of course, Stevens wanted his readers to derive more from his poems than their superficial dazzle and strangeness.

Several things can be said at the outset about these ten poems: they are not part of a chronological arrangement;[1] it seems that other poems could be substituted for some of them without causing serious dislocation ("Fabliau of Florida," for example, for "Infanta Marina"); as a group they are *relatively* un-

complex and undaunting—Stevens could have begun with "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" or "The Comedian as the Letter C" or have included a higher proportion than he did of his more flamboyant and bizarre short poems such as "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" and "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman." At any rate, I can discern no programmatic pattern in the arrangement. The principle would seem to be a studied randomness or purposeful discontinuity. Still, if there is nothing sacrosanct about the arrangement, this group is the entrée into *Harmonium*, and since Stevens, as he reported in a letter Harriet Monroe (*Letters*, p. 232), had made "the most fastidious choice" of poems for the volume as a whole it seems reasonable to assume that he was at least mindful of how the opening poems might affect readers and initiate them into the volume.

George Mcfadden has felicitiously described the nature of coming to comprehend the poet's work: "Stevens' meanings do not come to the reader so much through quick insights as by gradual accretion. One does not suddenly grasp his ideas, but rather comes to feel comfortable with a poem which had at first teased and annoyed while it charmed, and whose meaning is the last of its pleasures."[2] "Earthy Anecdote" is a case in point, the poèm with which Stevens aptly and adroitly begins teasing us into *Harmonium*, and thus, even though much has been said about this suave and witty "anecdote," I would like to rehearse briefly the process of coming to a sense of its meaning and effect. Clean and spare in the modern way, the poem leaves a reader little to grasp at first, and, with its matter-of-fact manner of telling, the only certain assumption to be made about the clattering bucks and leaping firecat is that what a flat paraphrase would include. How cleverly Stevens perserves the anecdotal veneer of the poem. But in its very pretense of matter-of-factness (and of course by its nature the true anecdote lacks depth of meaning) the poem elicits curiosity: we demand that the moving configuration it delineates yield some point. What can we reasonably derive? We might at first respond to the symmetry of movement itself, which reaches a narrative conclusion of sorts as the movement is swallowed in the wry, quiet and ultimately nondisclosing closure: "Later, the firecat closed his bright eyes/ And slept." Is the creature bored? satiated? re-experiencing the activity in its dreams? What? We will get no sure answer. Nevertheless, the form of the rudimentary tale may provoke the first stirrings of aesthetic satisfaction in the reader. Also, at some point the poem begins to press upon us the fact that the abstract, curvilinear "dance" movement occurs in the open spaces of Oklahoma—hence a conjunction of art and nature, which is reinforced by the poetic designation of the bristling animal with its "bright eyes" as firecat. It is a quasi-fabulous beast (perhaps reminding us of Blake, as has been suggested) combining naturalistic ferocity and the magic of the iconographical. But, then, for Stevens the imagination itself is a ferocious force confronting reality; the two, imagination and reality, are fused in the symbolic creature. Thus does the anecdote become a miniature fable through the agency of which the fluid movement of the physical world is realized—life in motion is caught in the rhythmic contours of the verse. Here the chaotic assumes a momentary order and meaning. Suffice it to say that the brief poem is alive with implications that center on art, nature, imagination and reality, and

that it requires of the reader an act of participation and perception. The reader is surprised into a recognition, an act of the mind as the poet would put it later. And thus Stevens subtlely draws the reader into the aesthetic and epistemological games of *Harmonium*, serious games to be sure.

If it had been Stevens' aim to move us into the second poem with ease and continuity, "The Load of Sugar-Cane," the tenth of these poems, would seem a natural one to follow "Earthy Anecdote" since it is quite similar in theme and method while extending the implications of the initial poem. Ostensibly an objective, imagistic description, it provides in the metamorphic flow of its similes—"The going of the glade boat/ Is like water flowing"; "The rainbows/ that are like birds,/ turning, bedizened"; "the wind" that "still whistles/ As kildeer do"—a sense of the flow of physical phenomena. The process of perception is caught in the images, and clearly resemblances are the means of knowing. The glade boat with its load of sugar-cane rides through the poem itself in a simple but majestic progress as the implications are revealed in the unfolding metamorphoses. Beyond the level of mere description, then, and however lushly pretty its imagery is, the whole poem becomes in effect a metaphor for the apprehending of the ever-changing, passing nature of reality in the form of language and imagery as they are shaped in the poem.

"Invective against Swans," however, the poem that does follow "Earthy Anecdote," creates, unlike "The Load of Sugar-Cane," a radical disjunction, for this second poem is very different in manner, tone, and theme from the first. Here instead of a matter-of-fact observer is an emotionally involved speaker, and the poem, partly because of its tonal ambiguities, is, if anything, more strange and perplexing than "Earthy Anecdote." Why is the speaker so irritated by the swans? For one thing, they are associated with the "death of summer" (and in the background I hear an echo of Tennyson's "After many a summer dies the swan"), and although the speaker asserts in a superior tone the ascension of the soul—"The soul, O ganders, flies beyond the parks/ And far beyond the discords of the wind"—he is troubled by the demise of summer's fullness, its brilliance now diminished to decadent "golden quirks" and its ripe sensuality to "Paphian caricatures." The speaker feels a futility and bitterness: "already.../ The crows anoint the statues with their dirt." The swans, emblems of grace and beauty, are part of the disintegration; it is as though in "a listless testament" their "white feathers" were bequeathed "to the moon" and their "bland motions to the air." In this language of death and wills their "chilly chariots," which like the reference to Paphos hint at classical mythology, become ironically heroic hearses. The speaker may proclaim the triumphant flight of the soul, as he taunts the swans with the epithet "ganders" (did Stevens have in mind the old folk saying "All your swans are geese"?) but the discords are more in him than in the wind. Stressing in his disillusionment the earthy, foolish physicality of the swans doesn't help, for the soul is "lonely" in its transcendant flight. The death of summer brings division, and nothing—neither the elevated lyricism and rhetoric of his melancholy nor his dandyish, sophisticated manner and superior tone—can allay the speaker's sadness and resentment. It is a curious poem, odd in its placement, and its tonal complexity is, even though an essential part of the total meaning, difficult to assimilate. Brought up

against the modernist indirection of the poem the reader must cut through the bafflement by a process of discovery, earning by thought and adjustments of emotional response the experience the poem offers. The reward is to feel a participation in the creation of an original point of view and experience. The dated dandyism may diminish the pleasure for us now, yet the eccentricity of method and the discontinuity of the poem's placement serve, if nothing else, to jar the reader loose from stock responses and commonplace attitudes.

It is yet another leap to the much less enigmatic, tender, lyrical colloquy of "In the Carolinas," which concludes:

> Timeless mother,
> How is it that your aspic nipples
> For once vent honey?
>
> *The pine-tree sweetens my body*
> *The white iris beautifies me.*

Because of that leap we are apt to miss the point of thematic closeness between the two poems despite the stylistic and tonal disparity. Although "In the Carolinas" concerns a moment of summer fulfillment, when "the new-born children interpret love/ In the voices of mothers," the poem suggests just how mutable that moment is. Those aspic nipples have usually, it seems, a less sweet, even venomous, function. Indeed, at this very moment of fruition the lilacs are withering in the Carolinas. The dispensation of the timeless mother is almost deceptively benign. The meaning and effect of the poem are more intricate than the lyrical tenderness would at first seem to allow.

There follow three poems which along with "In the Carolinas" rely on examples of Stevens' various feminine embodiments of harmonious being and constitute the nearest approach to a coherent sequence among the ten poems. In them the reader becomes aware of those perfected moments of human reconciliation with nature, or at least of the possibility of such moments, but even so the poet employs quite divergent means of seducing the reader into this awareness. The exalted rhetoric of "The Paltry Nude Starts on a Spring Voyage," for example, gains much of its validity from the ploy of artfully rejecting an archaic Botticellian version of Venus in order to transform the ordinary girl, who yearns to be at the center of existence, into a neophyte sea goddess. Denying myth, the poem creates a mythical action, the understated apotheosis of the nude, who in this *tour de force* is merely the precursor of the "goldener nude/ Of a later day," a mature goddess of true mythic stature, a real match for Venus. And "The Plot against the Giant" would seem to be a fragment of dialogue out of some little drama, characterized, as several commentators have pointed out, by its fairy tale quality. The seductive, aesthetic stratagems of the girls anticipate, of course, a fusing of the sensual, even sexual, and natural with the aesthetic and ideal. In the minds of the girls nature, the giant, will be tamed, brought into accord with the civilized. The semimythical beings in these poems are in effect wish-fulfillment figures for Stevens' desire to find an accord of the human mind with reality—how happy

he would have been to have lived in an age when a living myth would have certified that accord. As it is, the eponymous Infanta Marina of the following poem illustrates his longing for such figures and his tendency to sentimentalize his avatars of "fictive music" or, in this case, dance (she "performs" with the rumpling of her plumes an ethereal fan dance). With its reverential tone, exalted language, and unremittingly exquisite atmosphere, the poem is as precious as it is subtle (It was a long way from this spirit of the sea and evening, through "the single artificer" in "The Idea of Order at Key West," to Stevens' green fluent mundo). Even so, the poem pleasantly surprises with its metamorphosis of the plumes of the supernal little princess of the sea into the "actual" "sleights of sails/ Over the sea." The imagistically-evoked plumes/ sails hold the reader mentally hovering between the tangible and intangible so that the two tend to merge, the plumes taking on a concreteness and the sails sharing the evanescence of the magical moment ("sleights," of course, as in the phrase sleight of hand, underscoring the sense of magic). Although the preciousness of the poem may stand in the way of the awe such beauty ought to stimulate, the poem does insist on a sophisticated perceptual response and demonstrates the subtlety of apprehending the essence of the twilight sea scene and the associated human feelings brought into harmony with it as symbolized by the genius of the place, who "made of the motions of her wrist/ The grandiose gestures/ Of her thought."

Understandably, the gulf between this poem and the next, "Domination of Black," is the widest between any pair of these ten poems. It illustrates what Denis Donoghue has incisively referred to as Stevens' "struggle between plenitude and void" (New York *Times Book Review*, August 7, 1977, p.12). But while "Domination" insists on the fear of the void, of being human and mortal in an alien, naturalistic universe, it shows the power of art to transfigure and consequently to diminish that fear. The painterly title is only one way of signifying this. The wit is another, as the recalled claustrophobia, vertigo, and hysteria are imaged in the swirling pattern with a verve that verges on the wildly comic. Here, as in so many of Stevens' poems, the fantastic effects themselves imply that the force of the imagination measure up to the riotous force in nature (different as this poem is from "The Plot against the Giant," for example, some thematic similarities are evident). Part of the wit of the poem is in the choice of the peacocks, natural creatures which are in their seemingly artificial adornment as unreal as real can sometimes seem to be. Yet it is the throats of these walking or flying works of art that emit that naturalistic cry so alarming from the human point of view. All of this may amount to an elaborate way of whistling in the dark of this frightening vortex, but on the other hand the play and energy of the mind exhibit something of the resources and staying power of the human intelligence. Or, as Denis Donoghue formulates it in the same review I quote from above: "Stevens put his verses together to keep himself from falling apart." And the same applies to "The Snow Man," which follows "Domination" as a contrasting companion poem, winter blankness in place of autumnal *Angst*. Instead of giddiness and paranoia a stoic recognition and assertion define the tone, but "The Snow Man" too, if more quietly, rescues through language and art a beauty out of the negation, as in the image "juni-

pers shagged with ice." If it is the ultimate reality to discover an identity with the void, the saving grace is the human mind which can stand up to that reality with control and wit, especially as they culminate in the brilliantly clinching but metaphysically reverberating final stanza:

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

The something that is there, however, is the poem and the mind and sensibility that conceived and composed it. The result for the reader is awe, an uncanny and profound recognition.

Of these ten poems "The Snow Man" deals most effectively with Stevens' central obsession – the human relationship with an indifferent nature that capriciously provides plenitude or the "nothing that is." It is the mind that meditates, discovering moments of fortuitous order, even if that order depends on a realization of the essential bareness. But since the mind can only capture the *is* in the *as if*, one notes Stevens' heavy reliance on the aesthetic in these poems: they evoke a world of fancy, fable, fairy tale, and include quasi-mythic elements; they use implausible speakers and personae in unpredictable situations. The aim seems to be to confront the reader with constantly shifting perspectives that will lead to new realizations, to free the reader from worn, banal, and falsifying conceptions of reality. At times the result is the mannered aestheticism and deliquescence that he had to purge. Obviously the danger of art is that it too falsifies, a danger apparent in "The Ordinary Women."

Presumably the women, having read the "heavenly script" in their visit to the palace of art, return to reality renewed, "Puissant" of speech and filled with "Insinuations of desire." Yet what remains as the poem completes its circle, ending with its mirrored version of the first stanza, is a stalemate: poverty informs both reality and the palace of art, the poverty of physical decay and boredom in the former, the poverty of artificiality in the latter. The poem seems to suggest that the two are interdependent, but the effect, for all the inventiveness of the poem, tends to cancel anything positive. The irony is that Stevens resorts to such an overdetermined, arch control over the crucial problem the poem poses. The problem reflects his conflicting yearnings, one to experience openness with the phenomenal world, to feel an integration of his being with nature, the other to rivet, to fix his perceptions in the form of art. Life is motion; art is static. The ideal for Stevens is to capture these opposites in a symbiotic oneness. No wonder he placed "Earthy Anecdote" first; it exemplifies so well the desired fusion.

Saving Stevens from the excesses of the aesthetic was his nonchalance, his free and open receptivity to the transitory and incipient in life, his letting his poems come to him as they might, as they often did on his daily walks to the office. Some of this openness seems to affect the arrangement of the poems, as though Stevens were guarding against an impression of tight control. Indeed, from one point of view it could be said that the poems are "under the curse of miscellany," a phrase Stevens applied to a group of fourteen poems Harriet

Monroe published in the October, 1919 issue of *Poetry* (*Letters*, p. 215). Except for the loose cluster of four poems referred to earlier ("In the Carolinas," "The Paltry Nude," "The Plot against the Giant," and "Infanta Marina") and the logical pairing of "Domination of Black" and "The Snow Man" it is difficult, as I've indicated, to discover a rationale for the ordering. William W. Bevis has tellingly shown how Stevens deliberately broke up sequences and fairly homogenous groupings when he assembled *Harmonium*. He cites a number of reasons for this dispersal by the poet; he was covering his tracks, hiding his development; he was "suddenly" calling "new attention to each poem"; but chiefly he was pushing in the direction of contrasts which would have the value of "shock, novelty... exoticism," which would "confuse, tickle, tease, complicate and obscure." All of these reasons must have played their parts, and I agree with the assertion that the arrangement of *Harmonium* is "aesthetically functional," since it reflects Stevens' desire, "through imaginative distortions, to turn the world to better account."[3] Bevis makes this last assertion in passing, and though it invites a rather long discussion I'd like to make at least a few comments on it by way of closing.

Certainly the heterogeneity of the arrangement is another form of the teasing, but its serious function is in its appropriateness for Stevens' metaphysics. The abrupt shifts in tone and approach not only break through the aesthetic control and mannerist tendencies of the virtuoso poet, thus producing something of the random and unexpected; the discontinuities also reflect the accidental and fortuitous in life itself and upset any preconceived, rigidly-fixed notions of reality or order. As each poem places the reader coming to it in a state of disorientation initially, it creates a disruption of mind-set and requires an openness, a new act of discovery. The process becomes a rehearsal for encountering new experiences in our lives (perhaps this is partly what Stevens meant when he said that poetry should help us live our lives, and what Bevis means when he refers to turning "the world to better account"); we are exposed to the complexity of perceiving and coming to know anything. Furthermore, we derive a sense of the protean nature of reality and of the diversity and spontaneity of our potential responses. Against the falsifying order of art, then, is a dynamic, vivid unpredictability akin to what prevails in the world we inhabit outside the poems.

At the same time the poems and their arrangement reflect the unpredictability of modern art. The surprising perspectives and speakers, the stylistic and tonal innovations, and the general wit and bravado lend to these poems something of the radical newness and freshness of the paintings contemporary with them. The reader of these poems, like the viewer of the paintings, suffers at first a confused response, has a sense of formlessness. It is sometimes claimed that the modernist painters and poets intended no more than to create unsettling juxtapositions and dissonances that, in evoking the fragmentation of the age, were so manifestly modern. The techniques, however, had the further effect precluding, in a time of cultural disintegration and uncertainty, the presentation of customary ways of seeing the world. The viewer of a modernist painting or the reader of a modernist poem was challenged to become actively involved in the process of discovery, to work through initial shock

and disorientation to a realization of new perceptual and emotional possibilities and new modes of composition. By breaking up "sequences and fairly homogenous groupings," as Bevis demonstrates, Stevens was taking away a basis of ready comprehension. Split off from their original pattern of association and then "pasted together" in all their apparent randomness, the poems have some of the effect of collage. Faced by a decreation, the reader is forced to perceive a new set of relationships. It will not do to press this analogy with collage (and of course cubism) too far, but the analogy may not be too fanciful in the case of a poet who was to say later in "Connoisseur of Chaos" that "A great disorder is an order."

In any case, we do gradually begin to find our way about in the strange world of the poems. Even though the diversity of style and the range of effects along with the random ordering of these poems do suggest miscellany, underlying patterns do emerge—the drama of seasonal change, for instance, or the relationship of art and nature. We come to see that recurring thematic concerns appear in different guises. The dazzling variations are played upon the harmonium of the whole. The impression of order, of wholeness, that we derive has its source in the persistence and underlying consisitency of the poet's thought. The introductory ten poems I have dwelt on lure us into the harmonious intricacies of that thought, and the discontinuity of their arrangement shakes us into an intellectual and aesthetic activity that enables us to share vicariously in the thrill of creating the poems. We enter a poetic world that is spontaneous in effect, puzzling, shifting, disconcerting, vital and that at the same time offers the satisfactions of order and meaning. Stevens' method of teasing us produces its excesses in *Harmonium*: the lapses into an archness of tone and style; the willed obscurity so much a part of modernist irony and the attempt to avoid at all costs a simple, defenseless lyricism and the easily-grasped poetic pieties of the verse the modern poets so determinedly revolted against. But the brilliance of *Harmonium*, beyond these defects, endures. Rewarding in themselves, the first ten poems prepare the reader for "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" and then for all of Stevens' ensuing poems.

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NOTES

1. See William W. Bevis, "The Arrangement of *Harmonium*," *ELH*, vol. 30, 1970, pp. 456-73. I refer to this article later in my essay. Bevis gives an excellent insight into Stevens' strategy in arranging the poems. The article is primarily concerned with that strategy and the apparent reasoning that lay behind it. I have found the article very useful, though my emphasis is primarily on the responses of readers to the poems themselves as well as to their arrangement.

2. "Poet, Nature, and Society," *Modern Language Quarterly*, Vol. 23, 1962, p. 263.

3. Bevis. See pp. 467, 468, 471, and 472.

# Stevens and Keats' "Easeful Death": A Revision of Youth by Old Age

BETTY BUCHSBAUM

"There was an ease of mind like being alone in a boat at sea...." So Stevens' late lyric, "Prologues to What Is Possible," begins, connecting with other last voyage poems of long-lived poets like Lawrence and Whitman. Yet the old man's voice in this poem, despite the way it differs in weight, composure and detached intensity from the youthful, sensuous tones of John Keats, can be seen as turning back to, and remaking, aspects of two major Keats odes, written in the last years of that young poet's brief life.

Stevens, like Keats, was obsessed with death throughout his life in poetry[1] And he repeatedly reworked the materials of Keats' poems in his own lyrics.[2] But it is in Stevens' old age, I believe, that his bond with the young poet becomes even more interesting because of what seems their mutual stance toward death. In his early work, Stevens seems to keep death at a distance from his lyric self. In "Sunday Morning," for example, he philosophizes about the way any and every human being lives and dies, his culminating image those "flocks of pigeons" that go "downward to darkness on extended wings." And when he does look directly at his own death, as in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," he keeps those "warty squashes" to be "washed into rinds by rotting winter rains" at arms length through grotesque self-mockery. Only as an old man does Stevens achieve what Heidegger calls "authenticity" by writing out of a sense of "my death" as imminent in every moment[3] And it is just this personal sense of death's immediacy that marks Keats' memorable poems of 1819 – Keats who had become convinced as early as 1818 (with what one of his biographers calls a "chilling precision")[4] that he had only three more years to live.

My interest here is in exploring a connection between Stevens and Keats that has not been noted: the link between Stevens' late lyric, "Prologues to What Is Possible," written three years before his death at seventy-five, and Keats' "Ode to Nightingale" and "To Autumn," both written two years before his death at twenty-six.[5] In this late lyric, Stevens reshapes both Keats' problematic relationship to the song of the nightingale ("Darkling I listen; and, for many a time/ I have been half-in love with easeful Death") and his later resolute turning aside from that song and quandary ("Where are the songs of Spring, Ay, where are they?/ Think not of them, thou hast thy music too – ") in favor of confronting actual self and world, and hearing the minimal autumn music that yet remained.[6]

To speak of Stevens' lyric as remaking these odes is not to make a claim for conscious intention. We do know that Stevens was steeped in these odes and the questions they raised. But for evidence of connection, I turn entirely to the poems themselves. Furthermore, I make no claim to resemblance in respect to poetic details and texture. In Stevens' lyric, for example, there is no clear presence of any bird or birdsong, much less the figure of the nightingale, which Stevens asserted, early in his work, is a bird "I have never – shall never hear."[7]

But I do intend to show how (and in what form) poetic ideas and impulses that shape these two odes of Keats survive in Stevens' lyric, despite changes in images and metaphors. Stevens gives voice in this poem to needs and longings, fears and resistances, choices and strengths similar to Keats' lyric self, both as that self encounters the nightingale and as it later turns away from the memory of that encounter in "To Autumn." Significantly, Stevens in his single lyric builds a bridge between two distinct ways of responding to death, and thus also to life.

*The Pursuit of "Ease"*

Both the old man embarked on a sea voyage (Prologues I) and the young man on a flight towards a nightingale initially move away from known self and temporal world in pursuit of an "ease" connected with a seemingly purer kind of being and meaning. Yet their common pursuit entails several distinctions. The young poet anxiously seeks an ease he does not possess, but that breaks upon his consciousness from an external event – the singing of an invisible bird. In contrast, a sudden and inexplicable felt "ease of mind" stimulates the old poet's meditation. Moreover, the ease the young poet would possess *seems* clearer and less mysterious than that ease the old poet has received as one might a gift. For, at the outset, Keats can name what attracts him (the "full-throated ease" of the bird's singing in summer); he can articulate his destination ("And with thee fade away into the forest dim"); and he is equally explicit, as well as urgent, about the world he would escape from (where "but to think" makes one "full of sorrow" whether one is young or old.) The old poet, in contrast, knows only that he feels an "ease"; he "goes with " his feeling, discovering its content and meaning as he slowly experiences and images what it's like. When he can finally name his destination, he has arrived at its threshold: the mysterious "point" and "moment" of his own inevitable dying and death.

Despite these distinctions, however, the pursuit of "ease" brings both speakers to a moment when (in Keats' terms) "...it seems rich to die/ To cease upon the midnight with no pain." Death at such a moment seems a fulfillment, and thus painless. but what in each poem *is* the otherness for which consciousness yearns? How does each speaker understand his own desire?

Robert Pinsky, in a provocative discussion of "Ode to a Nightingale" as a touchstone for a central romantic dilemma inherited by Stevens (and other modern poets), finds that the speaker understands his own attraction to the nightingale as a desire for "the *un*conscious ease of the *physical world*."[8] (italics mine) The "essence" of the bird is not to be conscious at all, and it is this unconsciousness of "pure" being that the burdened young poet loves. Pinsky further remarks that Keats in this ode and Stevens in his early poem, "The Snow Man," take a moral stance towards this love of death (or "merging" with unconscious nature), and find it wanting. Such a reading, however, gives insufficient weight to Keat's sense of the emotional ambiguity of his symbol. In the ode the speaker becomes aware of what dying means for him as a particular sentient being, but he is never totally clear about what the bird signifies. To

overlook this distinction is to distort the grounds of the speaker's withdrawal from the bird. Both these points, moreover, are relevant to the nature of the quandry Stevens inherited from Keats and to his use of the nightingale experience in lyrics as different as "The Snow Man" and his late lyric "Prologues to What is Possible."

The nightingale turns out to be an even more ambiguous figure to the young speaker than the mysterious sea voyage becomes to the old voyager. In withdrawing from the bird, he never clearly distinguishes what he'd be merging *with*: physical or spiritual realm of being. to some extent he senses his longing is *reductive*, drawing him to a less than human state of being. Even as he's overcome by the bird's song, he distinguishes without "envy" between the bird's happiness and his own. And when he'd come close to the nightingale, he approaches only the dimness of beech trees and flowers, all unreflecting particulars of the physical world. But there is much in his tone and diction to suggest that he never wholly relinquishes the *elevated* potential of the bird. Possibly its otherness is that of an ideal realm of beauty and meaning that surpasses mere human being and existence. We, as readers, may find our reason strained by a burdened symbol (What evidence of "soul" and why "immortal"?). But the speaker's reason never wholly exposes what desire wishes to veil. At the climactic moment of intense desire, he endows the bird (and thus nature) with a "soul," addresses it as "thou," view its song as "ecstasy" and subsequently calls it "immortal":

> Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
> To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
> While thou are pouring forth thy soul abroad
> In such an ecstasy!

The full *emotional* ambiguity of the bird is gathered up into the "rich" moment of almost-merging, from which the speaker has already begun to withdraw. And he draws back from the nightingale not because (as Pinsky claims) he ses wholly without illusion what he'd be "merging with" (bird as unreflecting physical thing) but because he sees what merging of *any* kind entails:

> Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
> To thy high requiem, become a sod.

He perceives the price of merging, whether it be with "higher" or "lesser" being, is no less than the death of his particular consciousness.[8] Such an escape from self is equivalent, literally or figuratively, to becoming a lump of unconscious matter (sod). His "fancy" can't deceive him into thinking he can have it two ways at once: that he can both remain him self *and* dissolve into some more inclusive being, *however* defined. He knows unequivocally what he'll love, and that becomes too much. In drawing away from the bird, he recognizes that to hear the nightingale's song, to be receptive to its beauty and meaning, to speak these words and to be a poet—he must be a separate consciousness. Thus he

chooses connection, not merger, even though the choice lands him in the quandry of being "forlorn" (an isolated self) though not a "sod."

Now Stevens' "history" in relation to Keats' ode should be viewed, I suggest, in light of the ambiguity of Keats' symbol. As Pinsky points out, Stevens turns to the nightingale experience early in his career and plays out the implications of being "one with" nature, seen *un*ambiguously as a yearning for the unconscious ease of the physical world (the reductive aspect of Keats' symbol). In "The Snow Man", the "mind of winter" becomes so inextricably a part of the cold, white nothingness of the landscape that it almost relinquishes human consciousness ("And nothing himself, beholds/Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.") But here Stevens is not merely repeating, in a modern context, what Keats had already affirmed. Instead, he addresses an element or dimension of Keats' conflict that the young poet had never untangled: what that otherness *is* with which consciousness, in dying, would merge. And his negative judgment falls on both the *act* of merging and the *nature* or state of being into which mind would dissolve. Clearly that "nothing" rules out any ideal realm of beauty and meaning; it is a nature antithetical to human values, a negative sublime. Thus Stevens' poem is like a reassurance to both himself and his romantic predecessor that, on two counts, Keats' withdrawal from the lure of his symbol, his affirmation of "sole self" had been right. (No, it was not a vision and yes, you did wake.)

Yet as Stevens nears the end of his long life, the inevitability of dying stirs an old desire that was part of Keats' yearning towards the nightingale. What if it *could* be "rich to die" in the sense of dissolving or "dying into" a transcendent state of being and meaning? In this late lyric (Prologues I), Stevens revives and explores the elevated potential of Keats' ambiguous bird, in the form of a boat voyage that stretches beyond the known of any physical sea.

The early phases of this voyage (stanzas 1 & 2) partake of the strained, willed quality of Keats' imaginative flight into the forest (stanza IV). Keats tries to win his own rapid assent to being with the bird by framing his assertion in a fairy tale ("Already with thee! tender is the night,/ And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne.") Stevens works in long, unbroken sweeping lines to convert a potentially threatening image ("alone in a boat at sea") into a desired moment of annihilation by drawing on romantic catchwords of comfort ("one-ness" and "part of") as he humanizes the sea (stanza 1) and spiritualizes the boat (stanza 2):

> There was an ease of mind that was like being alone in a boat at sea,
> A boat carried forward by waves resembling the bright backs of rowers,
> Gripping their oars, as if they were sure of the way to their destination,
> Bending over and pulling themselves erect on the wooden handles,
> Wet with water and sparkling in the one-ness of their motion.
>
> The boat was built of stones that had lost their weight and being no
> longer heavy
> Had left in them only a brilliance, of unaccustomed origin,

So that he that stood up in the boat leaning and looking before him
Did not pass like someone voyaging out of and beyond the familiar.
He belonged to the far-foreign departure of his vessel and was part of it,
Part of the speculum of fire on its prow, its symbol, whatever it was,
Part of the glass-like sides on which it glided over the salt-stained water,

But Stevens, like Keats, can't overcome a sense of artificiality and pose, a reflection of his skepticism regarding his own analogies. Despite the form of "ease" maintained by the steady, quiet, long-reaching lines, his voyager finds only the language of wish but not of belief.

Yet strain and artifice fall away as the voyage moves toward the climax of nearly-arriving (stanza 3):

As he traveled alone, like a man lured on by a syllable without
any meaning,
A syllable of which he felt, with an appointed sureness,
That it contained the meaning into which he wanted to enter,
A meaning which, as he entered it, would shatter the boat and leave the
oarsmen quiet
As at a point of central arrival, an instant moment, much or little,
Removed from any shore, from any man or woman, and needing none.

As speech becomes simpler, more natural, the voyager discovers a substantive, not only a formal, ease. His near-arrival suggests a height of fulfillment — an awe-filled assent to no "shore" nor "any man or woman, and needing none." Though mysterious, it is a less ambiguous threshhold than is the nightingale to Keats. No undercurrent of implication pulls these lines towards a shattering that is merely a dropping of self into an unconscious, physical chaos of sea. The moment of shattering only comes with entry into the apex of "a meaning" — a positive sublime that eludes human comprehension even as it authenticates the metaphysical by means of language at once so strange and familiarly "central." The sureness and simplicity with which the speaker slides into and speaks his analogy compel, at least in the speaking, his own assent as well as the reader's.

Yet the old man's next words reaffirm the *grounds* of Keats' decision to withdraw from the moment when it seems "rich to die":

The metaphor stirred his fear. The object with which he was compared
Was beyond his recognizing. By this he knew that likeness of
him extended
Only a little way, and not beyond...

He rejects the metaphor because *he* would become unrecognizable, no more himself than a "sod." But he affirms Keats' choice after a vision of dying that promises transcendence of human consciousness. This vision is at the opposite pole from the retrenchment of the human into the "nothing" of the wintry land-

scape in "The Snow Man." It also seems to avoid the composite directions of Keats' nightingle. The old poet thus emphasizes that *even if* dissolution ("dying into") should be unequivocally "high" and "glorious", the consequences for one's self and one's humanity is the same. Fixating on such a vision only deprives the self of living fully in the time that remains.

How the poet comes to this point of refusal bears closer examination. Let's focus for a moment on what happens between the end of the old man's voyage and his rejection of his vision:

> As at a point of central arrival, an instant moment, much or little
> Removed from any shore, from any man or woman, and needing none.
>
> II
>
> The metaphor stirred his fear. The object with which he was compared
> Was beyond his recognizing...

The culminating lines of the boat voyage, prior to the poet's explicit refusal of his metaphor, possess simple poetic power. Artifice yields to the simplest of words in small, quiet groupings. The last line leads to the largest empty space and longest silence in the poem. This pause marks not only the end of a stanza but also the division of the poem into two equal parts. What echoes in that silence, and is carried over into that blank space, is that last final phrase—"and needing none." The power, and wonder, of this reverberation is that it conveys, almost simultaneously, a desired release from human stress and anxiety (no need at all, none) and the emptiness of such release (the "none" a small remove from no one, which suggests the specter of nothing and the reductive wintry mind of "The Snow Man.") Language both fulfills the mood of ease and threatens its unbalance; the words that compel belief almost immediately destroy it. Significantly, when the poet writes well (with concentrated power and suggestiveness), and thus affirms the capacity of his lyric self, he withdraws from a vision which rehearses his own dissolution, however "rich" that vision is.

In Keats' ode, the poet enacts a similar sequence of withdrawal from his vision on the heels of strong lines of poetry. In his lovely fifth stanza, willed flight subsides into a simplicity of imagined sense perception ("I cannot see what flowers are at my feet..."); poetry draws closest to the desired ease of birdsong. But immediately after this stanza, the poet commences his explicit withdrawal from "easeful Death." His poetic power recalls him to a sense of the other half of his love—for his own consciousness and art and life. Keats, however, is far more ambivalent than Stevens over the consequences of his choice.

### *Quandary—and Beyond*

Keats chooses connection rather than "merging" as he draws away from the night-

ingale; he would have ears to hear its song. But he quickly discovers that connection is an unstable middle ground; he finds himself losing touch with the elusive being, the purer source of meaning with which he would be connected. He avoids being a "sod" only to find he's a "sole self", caught up in the anxiety of being aware of time, process, and death, and with any surety connected only to other equally "forlorn" selves. His farewell is thus tinged with longing and snagged on uneasy backward agonizing:

> Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades
> Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
> Up the hillside; and now 'tis buried deep
> In the next valley glades:
> Was it a vision or a waking dream?
> Fled is that music: — Do I wake or sleep?

His questions emphasize the sharp sense of duality that shapes his sense of alternatives: sleeping or waking; death or life; mind or thing; self or other.

To see how Keats moves beyond the quandary of his ode's alternatives, I'd move several months, and poems, ahead in his life, picking up "To Autumn" where it refers obliquely to the nightingale (stanza 3):

> Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?
> Think not of them, thou hast thy music too, —

Here Keats' sense of duality, of oppositions that can't be reconciled, is as strong as in his earlier ode. But he moves beyond that ode's uneasy balancing act: his skeptical holding-in-mind what he can't reconcile. In the midst of autumn fields he has nostalgia for "songs of spring," all the registers of meaning and feeling the nightingale evoked. He thinks of those songs: allowing a moment's recognition of loss and unfulfilled desire. Yet he doesn't dwell on them because he has found a new source of connection that diminishes his anxiety about being "sole."

"Where are the songs of spring?" — this question only emerges after the speaker creates a presence out of the autumn season that fills to overflowing an actual space of bare, stubble fields. This figure both affirms his power as a poet (*he* sees) and provides connection with an-other that encourages rather than endangers his sentient being. When his question raises the specter of loss, that sense of presence is strong enough to turn him away from memory and intimate enough to be felt as both part of nature and part of self. "Think not of them, thou hast thy music too." The speaker, offering words that console, even promise, in a tone of tenderness and affection, blurs any distinction between "thou" as season of nature or as another side to himself. To realize that double "music", the speaker subsequently goes beyond his admonition to "think not" of a particular memory; in turning to what *can* be actualized, he *thinks* not so much at all:

> While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,

And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
Among the river shallows, borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

Instead of trying to transcend the self, the speaker becomes more embodied. Consciousness shapes and orders the details of the scene. The suppressed thought (of loss) even colors a number of those details. But thought and feeling are trimmed to the fit of the senses; the speaker is primarily the eye that sees and, especially, the ear that hears. Mind and word draw close to thing: that aspect of self and of nature the particulars of scene objectify and reveal.

Now I'd like to return to Stevens' lyric, coming in at the moment when his voyager withdraws from a final "arrival" (as Keats withdraws from the nightingale) because of the claims of self:

The metaphor stirred his fear. The object with which he was compared
Was beyond his recogizing. By this he knew that likeness of him extended
Only a little way, and not beyond, unless between himself
And things beyond resemblance there was this and that intended to
be recognized,
The this and that in the enclosures of hypotheses
On which men speculated in summer when they were half asleep.

The old poet's withdrawal, in contrast to that of Keats, neither lands him in a quandry of unreconcilable alternatives nor leads him to cast thinking in a negative light and role. Even as the poet speaks his "fear", he is in the process of uncovering, without any agonizing, another mode of ease. Exactly how, and to what effect, does Stevens create a bridge in his two-part lyric between the distinct directions of Keats' two odes?

By unhesitatingly naming the sea voyage a "metaphor", Stevens bypasses Keats' sharp sense of duality. His figures are all "makings" of his mind; a vision *is* a waking dream. And if a poet's figure arouses his fear (in this case because it is finally recognized as self-annihilating rather than self-enlarging), he proceeds to consider more satisfactory kinds of "making" that will yield connection. Moreover, in building a bridge between his original way of discovering metaphors and another way which will preserve the ease of an old man nearing, and rehearsing, his own death, he doesn't repress thinking but instead depends upon it, though this activity means something different to Stevens than it does to Keats.

The old voyager's sense of "fear" turns desire cleanly away from its original object; he exhibits none of Keats' nostalgic thinking back to an experience from which he has withdrawn. Instead, his previous flawed fiction-making process becomes the new object of contemplation. His thinking leads to the correction

of that process and, at the same time, temporarily fills the blank (emptiness) left by the aborted metaphor.

As for the specific nature of this productive thinking: the old man's speculation, though stimulated by fear, is detached from its own ego. Thinking proceeds with a quiet openness, even a casualness, as it generalizes from its own flawed example, then sorts and classifies. Starting with his perception of too wide a gap between self and metaphor, he distinguishes a category of "things beyond resemblance" to which his rejected boat and voyager belong. He then narrows the field of connection to the category of things "only a little way and not beyond." In Keats' terms, to *be* with the nightingale is to become unrecognizable; thus the figure belongs in the rejected first category. On the other hand, to hear "the small gnats mourn" is to establish a connection between small thing and human that does not do violence to the self; thus it falls in the safe second category. The old man's sense of the possible, however, doesn't stop at duality. As if aided by the way he spatializies his thinking, he returns to the area "between" self and "things beyond resemblance." By speculating on this "*between*" as possibly different from the emptiness of gap, he encounters his own unconscious and discovers an image for its fleeting, hard-to-articulate figurations: "The this and that.../ On which men speculated in summer when they were half asleep." Such thinking thus turns the self towards a new sense of otherness: its own unconscious, an inner inexhaustible source of connection.

The old poet finds, in this first stanza, a new space and focus for desire that mediates Keats' sharp sense of duality at the end of his "Ode to a Nightingale." And in the rest of the poem, he enacts his conjecture about what it's like for consciousness to respond to its own unconscious even as it simultaneously turns to the phenomenal world. Over the span of parts I & II of "Prologues," the speaker turns as far away *from* his original fantasy of death as wished-for-transcendence and *to* the actual world of still-to-be-realized connections as do the speakers over the span of Keats' two odes. Stevens, however, continues to observe the activity of his own mind even as thinking (that is rational and conscious) plays a less dominant role. He also takes the possibility of connection with the temporal world even further than does Keats.

Earlier I noted that Keats' admonition "to think not" of "the songs of spring" expands (on the evidence of his subsequent surrender to the autumn scene) to imply: think not so much at all. The poet's mind organizes and selects the details of the scene, but his bodily senses and emotions are primarily engaged. Similarly as the old poet, settled in the "half asleep" state of detached speculation, describes an encounter with the irrational, he thinks with his body. But he is conscious of, and enacts, a far deeper sense of embodiment than does Keats. He not only attends to his bodily senses but also to his bodily depths: his unconscious felt, and responded to, as animal, instinctual and buried:[10]

> What self, for example, did he contain that had not yet been loosed,
> Snarling in him for discovery as his attentions spread,
> As if all his hereditary lights were suddenly increased
> By an access of color, a new and unobserved, slight dithering,
> The smallest lamp, which added its puissant flick, to which he gave

A name and privilege over the ordinary of his commonplace—

His unconscious becomes a fertile source of new connections that expand (by adding to) his conscious self. Language enacts this process of adding what is not rational or mental to the self by discovering analogies, as buried as instincts and that appear like new-born things—barely perceptible, yet strangely powerful recognitions ("slight dithering" and "puissant flick").

Here the poet doesn't experience his unconscious as an awesome space: a vertical depth of chasm or abyss. But giving birth to the irrational (or securing a recognition which *can* be added) is represented as a halting, tenuous, process which temporarily excludes from its space (in its effort *to* recognize) anything but that effort and process. The poet, however, hasn't activated his unconscious in a dreamlike vacuum. He becomes aware of unconscious urgings ("snarlings in him for discovery") only as he becomes responsive to world ("as his attentions spread").

With the sure grasp of a recognition ("flick"), the poet enacts its impact on the phenomenal world, his language gathering momentum and sweeping to its miraculous completion. Finally, the "flick" or barely perceptible, irrational addition of mind, is inseparable from the world it transforms, at the same time that it generates a world of abundance and fullness:

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

*Final Music*

Now let's see how Stevens reinforces Keats' choice in "To Autumn" and goes beyond what Keats realizes. To fulfill the self's existence in time, Keats cuts that self off from transcendent longings, reflected in the earlier ode's "far out" or spatial distance, as well as in the invisibility of birdsong and flight. Instead, consciousness contracts to particular place and time on the strength of a new sense of connection—with autumn both as a season of nature and as a phase of his human self and life. As he surrenders to bare stubble fields, giving precedence to this physical senses, he finds the music of that self in things. In fact, self draws progressively closer to unconscious, physical thing as the coloration of what mind adds becomes less and less intrusive: in those last "hearings" (of crickets, red-breasts, swallows), mind allows things in the autumn world finally to *be* with barely a tinge of pathos. Somewhat paradoxically, out of a greater embodiment of self (eye and ear rooted in particular place and moment) comes a final spatial and temporal enlargement: those "gathering swallows" take vision to the horizon's limit and to the season's end.[11]

In turning to the actual and real (Prologues II), Stevens contracts neither self nor world to a particular moment and place of existence. Instead, he discovers and enacts a way that can potentially transform and enhance *any* perceptual moment — a way that floods the world with abundance and creates the world anew in every miraculous moment of the poem's last lines. The "flick" that mind adds not only becomes inseparable from thing, but each single thing (color, light, human look or touch) becomes a plenitude. Significantly, the motion at the end of the poem is as expansive as that of the boat on the sea at its mystical climax. Unlike Keats, Stevens doesn't cut the self off from the desire and expansive power behind its original heightened, transcendent vision (the boat voyage). Instead he redirects this power and converts a threatening "far beyond" human and natural worlds to an awesome but enlarging "abundantly within" those worlds. The shape of Stevens' lyric makes visual this conversion: the breadth of the boat journey away from actual self and world (part I), finding an equivalence in lyric space and time and feeling (Part II) as the speaker turns to its own unconscious (the area "between") and then, as the momentum of its access to an inner power as generative and creative as the source of life, sweeps out and recreates world. Consequently, instead of Keats' beautiful acceptance and realization of autumn's music in all the shades and tones of a rich minimal, Stevens recovers spring and magnitudes in this lyric written near the end of his life. Other late poems of Stevens resemble Keats' last ode in that they present and behold the "plain sense of things"; some also take Keats' human season of autumn further into winter and even to a new beginning.[12] But "Prologues" conveys a sense of something *like* a transcendental infinite. Out of the single and small (a light, look or touch) comes a plenitude that is vast and unspecified in its last two lines. This sense of the small unfolding or opening to the vast is reminiscent of Blake's "To see a world in a grain of sand / Infinity in a wild flower..." This is in contrast to the small specificity of swallows at the end of Keats' lyric and the "thinning out" of the texture of the scene from first to last stanza (as the poem moves from tactile and visual to auditory). Even if the speaker's eyes lift to the horizon in "To Autumn" in order to see the swallows, *their* particularity is the final image and note. Also, as "Prologues" recovers spring in its last lines, sorrow is no part of its texture. Once fear (and not sorrow) in the face of death is expressed, the poem gives itself to celebration and pleasure. The tension between opposites thus operates quite differently in the two poems. In "Prologues", heightened fear (of death) is the frame, the limit, and the apparent impetus to set aside that fear and to let go the speaker's capacity to reach a zenith of affirmation.

Traditionally, a sense of the sublime in nature or in a work of art is aroused by the vast, the great or the boundless. In Stevens' lyric, what is awesome is that something so initially slight, precarious, elusive, even formless as a "flick" or "dithering" can, when recognized, be so empowered by the poet's language to perform. And yet, and yet! Such power carries a double irony: its godlike generative capacity is contained within an old man's shrinking limits and within the mental space of his language of possibility and analogy.

Certainly, the sensibility of each poet contributes to the quality of his resolutions. But in overcoming some of the dilemmas and anxieties that Keats

faced, *age* in two senses of the word comes to Stevens' aid. As a poet of the *modern age*, he had available an era's skepticism about an artist's metaphors leading to "truth." He could with ease back away from a vision by considering it an unsatisfactory metaphor. And with equal ease he could be conscious of the unconscious as a source of renewal that was only *like* a new knowledge of reality, since it couldn't escape the human space of language and of mind. Also, in *his old age*, the voice in his lyrics seems to be that of a capacious mind, detached from its ego and highly receptive to its unconscious; in this final phase, conflicts that existed earlier in his poetry between mind and body, thought and sense, inner and outer, waking and sleeping – disappear. Stevens attains what a number of modern psychological theorists describe as a fulfillment of human capacity at the end of the life cycle.[13]

It is, finally, on the note of their common bond in responding to dying and death, despite the great contrast in stages of life, that I want to end. In speaking of the differences between youth and old age, Carl Jung once wrote: "...an old man who cannot bid farewll to life appears as feeble and sickly as a young man who is unable to embrace it."[14] In the work of the young Keats and the elderly Stevens, both convinced of their imminent deaths, the poles of "embrace" and "farewell" draw together in a manifestation of what might also be described as romantic irony.[15] On the other hand, each embraces his existence and temporal process in a style that reflects his sensibility and years. Keats inhabits fully with all his sensuous being, a particular moment and place of a season and of his life. Stevens discovers a way, via the figurations of his unconscious, potentially to enlarge and be enlarged by a moment that yet remains. Yet, on the other hand, each poet's embrace carries the seeds of its own relinquishment or "farewell." In Keats' final ode, the speaker who inhabits, sustains, feasts on the scene also tempers his hold with restraint; by the final lines of the lyric, each sound of the world is increasingly distant and, more and more, simply itself. Whereas in Stevens' lyric, the voice that floods the world with abundance also seems to step back – at a quiet remove from its own ego and from any urgency regarding a new self to be "loosed" or new world to be made.

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NOTES

1. For Stevens own references to this obsession, apart from the evidence his poems provide, see the Letters of Wallace Stevens, ed. Holly Stevens, (New York, 1966), p. 206.
2. Helen Vendler in her essay, "Stevens and Keats' 'To Autumn" in *Part of Nature, Part of Us* (Princeton, 1982) sketches the poet's life-long response to this ode alone.
3. Frank Kermode in his essay, "Dwelling Poetically in Connecticut" in *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration* ed. Buttel and Doggett (Princeton, 1980) discusses Heidegger's views on death as they bear on Stevens' ideas and poetry.
4. Aileen Ward, *John Keats, The Making of a Poet* (New York, 1963), p. 185.
5. See Vendler, op. cit. for connections between Keats' single ode "To Autumn" and other late poems of Stevens.
6. H.W. Garrod was the first to identify "The songs of Spring" with the song of the nightingale, making the link through Ruth and the gleaner.
7. "Autumn Refrain," (CP 160), written in 1931. In this poem, Stevens regrets the absence of the nightingale and all it symbolizies. While the poet never does hear the bird in his poems, my point is that in "Prologues to What is Possible," Stevens finds another vehicle (a boat voyage) for emotions invested in the nightingale.
8. Robert Pinsky, *The Situation of Poetry* (Princeton, 1976) pp. 47 ff.
9. Walter Jackson Bate (among others) also sees Keats' withdrawal from the nightingale as motivated by aware-

ness of what *his* death in fact means (death as the great divider) rather than by his unambiguous insight into what the nightingale represents.

10. See my article, "Wallace Stevens: The Wisdom of the Body in Old Age" (*Southern Review*, Autumn, 1979) for a discussion of the body and the unconscious in Stevens' late poetry as a whole.

11. The same dynamic is at work in respect to both Keats and Stevens: the acceptance of limits as a condition for any transcendence of those limits. The difference in the quality or depth of their embodiment seems primarily a function of the difference in their ages. (see Buchsbaum, op. cit.)

12. "The Plain Sense of Things (CP 502) and "Not Ideas about the Thing, but the Thing Itself" (CP 534).

13. See Buchsbaum, op, cit., for a discussion, in the light of psychological theories, of the quality of detachment as well as the disappearance of mind/body dualism in Stevens' late poetry.

14. Carl Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (New York, 1933) p. 112.

15. Anne Mellor in *English Romantic Irony* (Cambridge, 1980) describes the romantic ironist as one who "enthusiastically commits himself and at the same time acknowledges his own limitations as a finite being and... the limitations of his merely fictional creations."

## DACTYLOGRAPHY

note: This is a section of a long poem.

Who makes music when the birds grow silent?
What incessant melodist steps onto the stage?
A song of August ascended from the oak.
She saw green sun, she saw white sun,
She saw at the vortex a glitter of stars.

The pin oak is a winter tree.
It stands stiff and gray against the January light.
The song of the wolf—is that a January song?

Her boss was an editor named Eliot.
He asked: why have you hung your dirty linen?
The typist home. The electric fire.
She asked: What have you done to April?

Her boss was a professor named Pound.
He said: You have not modernized yourself.
The cage was closing. No. To the ship.
She said: My Chinese is poor.

Her boss was a lawyer named Stevens.
He asked nothing. He said nothing.
Every page she typed he tossed to the floor.
She crawled in dirty silence.

O my fathers. I wasn't born in armor.

That day she had to keep wielding
The steel unstapling claws.

—Julia Budenz

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