

*The  
Wallace  
Stevens  
Journal*



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# The Wallace Stevens Journal

Volume VII Numbers 1 & 2

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## The Wallace Stevens Journal

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# "The More Than Rational Distortion" In the Poetry of Wallace Stevens

DAVID L. LAVERY

"The greatest sorcerer [writes Novalis memorably] would be the one who bewitched himself to the point of taking his own phantasmagorias for autonomous apparitions. Would not this be true of us?"

I believe that it is. We (the undivided divinity that operates within us) have dreamed the world. We have dreamed it strong, mysterious, visible, ubiquitous in space and secure in time; but we have allowed tenuous, eternal interstices of injustice in its structure so we may know that we may know that it is false.

Jorge Luis Borges  
"Avatars of the Tortoise"

The desire to hold nature to itself, to name it "flatly," is everpresent in the poetry of Wallace Stevens. In the late poem "The Rock," for example, Stevens expresses his hopes for a final "cure of the ground / or a cure of ourselves, that is equal to a cure / Of the ground, a cure beyond forgetfulness."<sup>1</sup> But this desire is never fully satisfied, for man's conceptual pigeonholing of reality is continually overthrown by a prompting to make things over new which comes from within "reality" itself. In "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens calls this prompting the "more than rational distortion," and he identifies it further, while in direct address to what he calls the "Fat girl" (the earth, the provider of all the raw materials of the human mind) in praise of her wonders, as "The fiction that results from feeling"; that is to say, man's perception of "the more than rational distortion" inspires his ability to imagine and brings about his need for the creation of those fictions which will help him to counter the "pressure of reality" exerted upon him by the world in which he lives, a world which, though seemingly familiar, remains always "in difference," always unmastered, inhuman:

Fat girl, terrestrial, my summer, my night,  
How is it I find you *in difference*, see you there  
In a moving contour, a change not quite completed?

You are familiar yet an aberration.  
Civil, madam, I am, but underneath  
A tree, this unprovoked sensation requires

That I should name you flatly, waste no words,  
Check your evasions, hold you to yourself.  
Even so when I think of you as strong or tired,

Bent over work, anxious, content, alone,  
You remain the more than natural figure. You  
Become the soft-footed phantom, *the irrational*

*Distortion*, however fragrant, however dear.  
That's it: *the more than rational distortion*,  
*The fiction that results from feeling*. Yes, that.

(*CP*, p. 406; my italics)

A poem like "Woman Looking at a Vase of Flowers" (*CP*, pp. 246-47) illustrates well the function of "the more than rational distortion" in Stevens' phenomenology of perception. The poem describes a woman's reconstruction in memory and imagination of how a vase of flowers on her piano once became for her — how "crude and jealous formlessness / Became the form and the fragrance of things / Without clairvoyance, close to her." Though the flowers are, by the poem's close, "real" — that is, natural and ordinary — they were not always so, as the poem makes clear, nor in Stevens' poetry are any of the things of our world: everything is seen the way in which it is seen only because we learned to see it that way.

Once, when the flowers first appeared on her piano, it seemed to the woman "as if thunder took form" there. And, as the poet admonishes the "little owl within her" — her true phenomenological wisdom — to recall accurately her imagination's initial construction of the scene, the true process by which the flowers became real and "close to her" is revealed. Out of what was originally only distortion and dissonance ("crude and jealous formlessness"), her eyes learned to perceive "how / High blue become particular / In the leaf and bud," "how the central, essential red / Escaped its large abstraction," "how the inhuman colors fell / Into place beside her, where she was." It was, we are told, a process of "human conciliations," "A profounder reconciling" that had made an alien, "inhuman" image become something that can be known in "An affirmation free from doubt." To Stevens, every image is similarly secured for the processes of human thought from out of the "difference" in which man perpetually finds himself; but in Stevens' world of process, stability cannot endure; the woman's vase of flowers will yield again to distortion and, yet again, to another imaginal reconstruction.

The more than rational distortion exists because, as Stevens explains in *The Necessary Angel*, "There is in reality an aspect of individuality at which every form of rational explanation stops short."<sup>2</sup> The difference between this ever elusive individuality existent in things and the reality momentarily captured by the mind of man is the more than rational distortion; and it is the business of the poet, as Stevens insists again and again in both his prose and poetry, to seek it out, for its influence creates poetry. Each image which man secures of his world, Stevens insists, is merely an "elaboration of a particular of the subject" (*NA*, p. 127), an excerption, and these "elaborations" Stevens tends to call "facts." Thus the province of the imagination is, to Stevens, factual; for to Stevens imagination is man's capacity for apprehending the true uniqueness, the true individuality of things.

Consequently, imagination has several distinctive characteristics for Stevens. Imagination is, first of all, always "at the end of an era." Because man's imagination always seeks a new order and a new individuality,

it is always attaching itself to a new reality, and adhering to it. It is not that there is a new imagination, but that there is a new reality.

(NA, p. 22)

The imagination in Stevens' view is, therefore, not so much within man, as a power within which man dwells. For as Stevens explains, the poet

comes to feel that his imagination is not wholly his own but that it may be a part of a much larger and more potent imagination which it is his affair to try to get at. For this reason, he pushes on and lives, or tries to live, as Paul Valery did, on the verge of consciousness.

(NA, p. 115)

Thus for Stevens the realms of complete fact and complete imagination are, contrary to all standard definitions of these two words, made up of the same contents. As Stevens explains,

there are so many things which, as they are, and without any intervention of the imagination, seem to be imaginative objects that it is no doubt true that absolute fact includes everything that the imagination includes.

(NA, pp. 60-61)

And that which makes objective facts seem to possess an imaginal quality is the more than rational distortion. For the more than rational distortion, as Stevens conceived of it, need not be thought of as a product of fancy. It is not the creation of the intellect at all; rather, it is indisputably *there*, a primary process, present in the very potentiality of perception whenever man's inherent tendency to gloss or hypothesize reality momentarily falters.

All men live, Stevens felt, in a world of imagination, even the most non-poetic. "Take the case of a man for whom reality is enough," he observed, "Does he not dwell in an analogy?" (NA, p. 129). But though all men may perceive the world through those imaginal constructions which they impose upon it, a time eventually arrives when the "analogy" breaks down — for the imagination is always at the end of an era — and reality becomes momentarily distorted. Because the poet — a man for whom reality is never enough — dwells always in an in-between realm, between eras of the imagination, he perceives reality and imagination as a seamless continuum. He knows that perhaps there exists

a degree of perception at which what is real and what is imagined are one: a state of clairvoyant observation, accessible or possibly accessible to the poet, or, say, the acutest poet.<sup>3</sup>

To the individual for whom reality is enough such states of "clairvoyant observation" would be perplexing, even mind-blowing. Stevens enjoyed imagining the results; his *Collected Poems* contains numerous examples of the encounters of non-poetic minds with the more than rational distortion.

Before such encounters, the world revealed in perception remains "as unreal as real can be / In the inquisite eye" (*CP*, p. 468) of all the many smugly rational individuals of Stevens' poetry: the men at the Sorbonne in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," who long to make "the irrational... rational" (p. 406); Mrs. Alfred Uruguay, who has "said no / To everything" (p. 249); the Doctor of Geneva (p. 24); the early and late Crispin of "Comedian as the Letter C." All these individuals are certain of the meaning of reality until "flicked by feeling" (p. 407) they begin to perceive that their assessment of the real is too shallow. Crispin, for example, takes his unobservant eyes to sea and there, meeting for the first time, without his usual mediation, the "Ubiquitous concussion, slap and sigh, / Polyphony beyond his baton's thrust" (p. 28) of the ocean, has his mind blown by the more than rational distortion inherent in things. For he witnesses there:

memorial gesturings  
 That were like arms and shoulders in the waves,  
 Here, something in the rise and fall of wind  
 That seemed hallucinating horn, and here,  
 A sunken voice, both of remembering  
 And of forgetfulness, in alternate strain.  
 (p. 29)

His new experiences make "him see how much / Of what he saw he never saw at all" (p. 36), and although by the poem's end his "relation" to this newly discovered world has been "stopped," it for the moment makes him a new and better poet.

Crispin's ocean voyage exposes him to what Stevens' elsewhere calls the "vulgate of experience," or the "eye's plain version" (*CP*, p. 465), Stevens' designations for the natural order of things before human reason begins to structure it. This "gaudy, gusty panoply" (p. 30), however, is not to be endured, for as Stevens observes "The plainness of plain things is savagery" (p. 467). For the "vulgate" is "gibberish"; it makes no human sense. And yet it is, nevertheless, the source of all poetry: this "muddy centre" of our experience existed, Stevens reminds, "before we breathed," and even then it was "Venerable and *articulate* and complete" (p. 383; my italics). It remains, even now, the authentic source of inspiration, of newness, of the facts with which the imagination deals, and the real motion of the poem is, as Stevens suggests,

from the poet's gibberish to  
 The gibberish of the vulgate and back again.  
 (p. 396)

The presence of the "vulgate of experience" in a poet's mind — a presence which the poet must feel if he is to be at all "realistic" (for the "vulgate," in a sense, is alone "real," all other orders being mere extrapolations from it) — Stevens likes to call the "first idea." The "first idea" always remains "The hermit

in a poet's metaphors" (p. 381), and when a contradiction is noted by the poet, when he perceives a clash, a sense of incompatibility, between the "vulgate" and the currently accepted translation, or fiction, by means of which he at present sees the world, then the "hermit" comes out of hiding, summoning the poet to dip down into the well of experience again in order to begin to make new. "The more than rational distortion" is Stevens' name for the perception of incongruity which is the genesis of this whole process.

The more than rational distortion in Stevens' poetry is identified with iridescence and dissonance, that is, with the difference between the expected and the seen. Crispin, for example, journeys into "A savage color" (p. 30), within which his perception changes until he seems to be hallucinating. In "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" it is "the grossest iridescence of ocean" which "Pierces us with strange relation" and causes us to question the reality of the world (p. 383); in "The Doctor of Geneva" it is again the ocean — the Pacific — which assaults a man accustomed to lakes with "visible, voluble deluging, / Which yet found means to set his simmering mind / Spinning and hissing with oracular / Notations of the wild, the ruinous waste" (p. 24); in the "Place of the Solitaires" (another of Stevens' many appellations for poet) "perpetual undulation" (p. 60) is characteristic; in "Ordinary Evening in New Haven," even the "faithfulness of reality," of the quotidian round of day and night, only serves to "make gay the hallucination in surfaces" (p. 472); and the true hero, we are told, is the individual who is able to blend in "hymns" the "iridescent changes" which he experiences in

A thousand crystals' chiming voices,  
Like the shadow-shadow of lights revolving  
To momentary ones...

(p. 279)

Again and again Stevens describes the source of poetic inspiration in terms of distortion; poetry's real genesis is for him always, as it is in "The Sun This March,"

Like an hallucination come to daze  
The corner of the eye.

(p. 134)

For Stevens it is the corner of the eye, the peripheral vision, which makes poetry; for it is there that the unexpected makes itself felt, that the more than rational distortion is noted; it is our peripheral vision which discovers and does not impose. In our peripheral vision "fictive things / wink as they will" (p. 59).

"The poem," Stevens claims, "must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully" (p. 350). That is, it must escape the focal's imposition of a stereotyped reality. For Stevens, "to impose is not / to discover" (p. 403); man's imaginative gains are not to be secured from "applied / Enflashings" of "reason's click clack" (p. 387). Stevens retains a faith that poetry is not a willed

imposition of an anthropomorphic point of view between man and his world; in "The Comedian as the Letter C" the poem's first line — "Nota: man is the intelligence of his soil" — metamorphizes into Crispin's later "rude aesthetic," formulated after his experience of the more than rational distortion on his ocean voyage: "Nota: his soil is man's intelligence" (pp. 27, 36). Because "The squirming facts" of the periphery "exceed the squamous mind" (p. 275), there must be in the poet a trust in "the ever-never-changing same, / An appearance of Again, diva dame" (p. 353) that it will alone sustain him and his art. For Stevens, this "diva dame" is nothing else than the earth, the "Fat girl, terrestrial"; and though he longs to see her "naked" (p. 396), he cannot. For she can be seen only "in difference," "familiar yet an aberration." She makes herself visible only through the more than rational distortion.

The more than rational distortion, although a seeming, is real; and when Stevens tries to persuade us of its existence, his sense of urgency is apparent:

It is like a thing of ether that exists  
Almost as predicate. But it exists,  
It exists, it is visible, it is, it is.  
(p. 418)

And, therefore, the "seeming" of the imagination is not a seeming at all, but a power by which things are made to be what they are, for as Stevens explains:

It is possible that to seem — it is to be,  
As the sun is something seeming and it is.

The sun is an example. What it seems  
It is and in such seeming all things are. (p. 339)

In "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet," in what is perhaps Stevens' fullest explanation of his understanding of the meaning of imagination, he draws a similar analogy;

The acute intelligence of the imagination, the illimitable resources of its memory, its power to possess the moment it perceives — if we were speaking of light itself, and thinking of the relationship between objects and light, no further demonstration would be necessary. *Like light, it adds nothing, except itself.*

(NA, p. 61; my italics)

Imagination, Stevens is telling us, adds to the world nothing that is not there, for like light it only discovers what *is* there in the panoply of sensation, though it may not yet be realized. The imagination receives the gifts of the periphery, draws out of the "vulgate of experience" a non-ordinary reality which will one day come to seem factual. When the imagination is understood in this way, then man comprehends, as Stevens explains in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," the nature of his project as a "carpenter" of the real; out of "the more

than rational distortion" he perpetually constructs a reality which will stand only until the more than rational distortion will once again signal reality's demise and the need for a new reality:

The life and death of this carpenter depend  
On a fuchsia in a can – and *iridescences*  
of petals that will never be realized,

*Things not yet true which he perceives through truth,*  
*Or thinks he does, as he perceives the present,*  
*Or thinks he does, a carpenter's iridescences,*

Wooden, the model for astral apprentices,  
A city slapped up like a chest of tools,  
The *eccentric exterior* of which the clocks talk.

(p. 478; my italics)

University of Alabama in Huntsville

#### NOTES

1. *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfrd A. Knopf, 1954), p. 526. Subsequent references to this work will be referred to as *CP* and cited in the text; unless otherwise indicated all quotations are from *The Collected Poems*. For an excellent discussion of this key theme in Stevens' work, see J. Hillis Miller's discussion of 'The Rock' in "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure," *Georgia Review*, XXX, No. 1 (Spring 1976, 5-31, and Part II, XXX, No. 2 (Summer 1976), 33-48.
2. *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1951), p. 93. Subsequent references to this work will be referred to as *NA* and cited in the text.
3. *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), p. 166.

## Stevens, Lowell, Ulysses: Some Notes on Influences

BRUCE BAWER

Near the ends of their lives, both Wallace Stevens and Robert Lowell wrote relatively long, ambitious poems about Ulysses. Stevens' "The Sail of Ulysses" appeared in 1954, the year before his death, and Lowell's "Ulysses and Circe" was published in 1977, a few months before his passing. Both poems, at least in part, contemplate the fact of aging and death, and consider whether the poetic act offers any promise of redemption from the ravages of time. An occupation with the subject of mortality is evident in Stevens' poem, wherein Ulysses says that

In the generations of thought, man's sons  
And heirs are powers of the mind,  
His only testament and estate.  
He has nothing but the truth to leave.<sup>1</sup>

Lowell's Ulysses, in the only section of "Ulysses and Circe" (V) in which he is the speaker, laments:

I have grown bleak-boned with survival –  
I who hoped to leave the earth  
younger than I came.

Age is the bilge  
we cannot shake from the mop.

Age walks on our faces –  
at the tunnel's end,  
if faith can be believed,  
our flesh will grow lighter.<sup>2</sup>

What salvation is there from old age? In "The Sail of Ulysses," the answer lies in the union of memory and the creative faculty:

The mind renews the world in a verse,  
A passage of music, a paragraph  
By a right philosopher: renews  
In the John-begat-Jacob of what we knew,  
The flights through space, changing habitudes.

In "Ulysses and Circe," poetry is no answer. Ulysses returns home to find Penelope accepting the overtures of her suitors and unimpressed by him because even

the lying art the divine Minerva  
will not make him  
invincible as he was,  
her life ago, or young...

Stevens, then, writes his poem at least partly to celebrate the fact that poetry, music, philosophy can redeem man, in a sense, from the devastations inflicted by the temporal nature of his existence. Lowell, on the other hand, writes his poem at least partly to lament the fact that he sees no such possibility of redemption. Old is old. Minerva – goddess of wisdom and the arts – is powerless.

This divergence in thought is illustrated by the different uses, in “The Sail of Ulysses” and “Ulysses and Circe,” of the sun. In both poems, it is an important image. In Stevens, it is the shine of thought, imagination, creativity – a dark shine, a natural mystery of the mind. Lowell’s sun is a real sun, clocking time, “dull changer of night to day, / itself unchanged, in war or peace.” Whereas Stevens’ sun, then, symbolizes the power of the human mind to create, and thus the possible domination of the concrete world by the abstract thought, Lowell’s sun symbolizes the unalterable rule of the abstract by the concrete, and implies the inefficiency of a mortal’s artistic strivings in the face of time and the real world.

In the end, then, Stevens’ Ulysses finds solace in poetry, while Lowell’s does not. As important as this distinction, however, is the remarkable similarity between the poems: both poets, by virtue of their age and vocation, are navigating the same philosophical waters; and both find in Ulysses an appropriate helmsman. It is, perhaps, worthwhile to try to account for this coincidence.

The most obvious answer is direct influence of the earlier poem on the later. Did Lowell, in other words, take the idea for “Ulysses and Circe” from Stevens’ “The Sail of Ulysses”? In trying to make such a determination, we must take into consideration the earlier works of both Stevens and Lowell. For neither “The Sail of Ulysses” nor “Ulysses and Circe” was a maiden voyage into Homeric seas: both authors had already written shorter, less ambitious pieces of verse featuring characters from the *Odyssey*. Stevens, two years before “The Sail of Ulysses,” had written “The World as Meditation,” which centers on Penelope rather than on Ulysses, and Lowell, a decade before “Ulysses and Circe,” had published a sonnet apiece on the Ithacan royal couple. One might expect to find some evidence of Stevens’ influence in the Lowell sonnets, but on inspection Stevens’ Ulysses poems and Lowell’s sonnets prove to share little more than the names of the characters. Stevens’ twenty-four-line “The World as Meditation” is, like “The Sail of Ulysses,” about the powers of the human mind. Stevens portrays Penelope, during her long years of waiting, as continually imagining Ulysses’ homecoming; and it is this enactment of their reunion in her mind, rather than an actual reunion, which gives her satisfaction. Thus, although in reality the warmth she feels is “only the warmth of her pillow,” in some sense she and Ulysses have “met, / Friend and dear friend.”<sup>3</sup> The poem is, in essence, a celebration of Penelope’s power to make an event transpire in her

mind. It is thus also about poetry – a celebration of the ability of the poet to engage in the self-creation of the mind.<sup>4</sup>

Lowell's sonnets, on the other hand, offer not a reverent contemplation of the individual's imaginative faculty but an irreverent look at interpersonal relations. "Penelope" ironically describes the return to home and hearth of Ulysses, the "heartless philanderer," while "Ulysses" (originally "Ulysses and Nausicaa") interprets the Ithacan royal couple as unloving spouses who think

... we were bound to fall in love  
if only we stayed married long enough –<sup>5</sup>

Both poets, then, make different uses of borrowed material. Stevens writes a version of Homer to make a statement about poetry; Lowell resurrects the epic characters for the purpose of commenting sardonically on marriage.

Considering the differences between these two poets' earlier recastings of the *Odyssey*, then, it is surprising that in "The Sail of Ulysses" and "Ulysses and Circe" the authors' perceptions of the character of Ulysses and the thematic uses they make of him are so similar. Each of these two late poems clearly grows out of its author's earlier treatments of the Homeric theme – Stevens' interest in the protagonist's power to create, and Lowell's ironic attitude toward his characters' relationships, remain – so there is little justification for positing Stevens' "The Sail of Ulysses" as an important influence on Lowell's "Ulysses and Circe." Yet the thematic resemblances between the two poems are so strong that one feels compelled to account for them.

Part of the explanation is Dante. Both "The Sail of Ulysses" and "Ulysses and Circe" take their conception of their common protagonist largely from the *Divine Comedy*. Dante's Ulysses says of himself that

...not the debt of love  
I owed Penelope to make her happy,  
could quench deep in myself the burning wish  
to know the world and have experience  
of all man's vices, of all human worth.<sup>6</sup>

So after returning to Ithaca and ejecting Penelope's suitors, according to Dante, Ulysses grows restless and, with those of his mates – all "old and tired men" – who have not deserted him, he "set[s] out on the deep and open sea." At the Pillars of Hercules (Gibraltar), Dante's Ulysses urges his men that

during this so brief vigil of our senses  
that is still reserved for us do not deny  
yourself experience of what there is beyond,  
behind the sun, in the world they call unpeopled.

He reminds them that they are Greeks, "not born to live like mindless brutes / but to follow paths of excellence and knowledge." This Ulysses is in many

ways different from Homer's, who enjoys adventure, but whose primary quest is not "excellence and knowledge" but the way home. It was Ezra Pound, of course, who, finding in Dante's Ulysses something of an archetype, plucked him out of the *Inferno* to "sail after knowledge" again in the *Cantos*. Pound's influence upon twentieth century American poetry is well established; it is hardly surprising, then, that both Stevens, in "The Sail Ulysses," and Lowell, in "Ulysses and Circe," should derive their conceptions of their common protagonist from the older and more philosophical Ulysses which Pound borrowed from Dante.

Stevens opens his poem by describing Ulysses as "Symbol of the seeker," and the poem, a monologue, begins with an epistemology which recalls "the burning wish / to know" both the world and men that characterizes Dante's Ulysses:

If knowledge and the thing known are one  
So that to know a man is to be  
That man, to know a place is to be  
That place, and it seems to come to that;  
And if to know one man is to know all  
And if one's sense of a single spot  
Is what one knows of the universe,  
Then knowledge is the only life,  
The only sun of the only day,  
The only access to true ease,  
The deep comfort of the world and fate.

Lowell's "Ulysses and Circe," unlike "The Sail of Ulysses," deals directly with materials from the *Odyssey*, and does not show Ulysses during the post-*Odyssey* period of his life chronicled by Dante. Still, however, the Ulysses we find in "Ulysses and Circe" is more thoughtful and more profoundly troubled than Homer's hero, and the home and wife he returns to bear little resemblance to the ones Homer imagined: Penelope, for example, has taken her suitors as lovers. Indeed, Lowell makes it clear that his Ulysses derives not only from Homer but from Dante, telling us that he

...will die like others as the dogs will,  
drowning his last crew  
in uncharted ocean,  
seeking the unpeopled world beyond the sun,  
lost in the uproarious rudeness of a great wind.

Lowell's Ulysses, then, like Dante's and Pound's and Stevens', is a "seeker." Jerome Mazzaro, though not mentioning the *Inferno's* contribution to "Ulysses and Circe," confirms in his masterful book on Lowell the strong influence that Dante had on his poetry.<sup>7</sup>

In neither Stevens' nor Lowell's poem, however, is the Dantesque element unaffected by other influences. The speaker in "The Sail of Ulysses" does not

come directly out of the *Inferno* (or the *Cantos*, for that matter), but comes filtered, as it were, through the artistic consciousness of Alfred Lord Tennyson. The importance of Tennyson's influence on Stevens' — admittedly, more in evidence in Stevens' earlier work — is documented by Robert Buttel in his book on the writing of *Harmonium*, although, like Mazzaro, he does not mention the Ulysses poem in establishing this connection.<sup>8</sup> Yet clearly Tennyson's "Ulysses" lies behind Stevens' "The Sail of Ulysses." Both poems are primarily monologues, and they share a striking similarity of tone. Indeed, certain lines of Stevens' poem echo lines of Tennyson's. For example, the Ulysses of Tennyson's poem speaks of experience as

...an arch wherethrough  
Gleams that untraveled world whose margin fades  
Forever and forever when I move.<sup>9</sup>

Stevens' Ulysses too speaks of an "untravelling world," never to be fully known:

Yet always there is another life,  
A life beyond this present knowing,  
A life lighter than this present splendor,  
Brighter, perfected and distant away...

Tennyson's Ulysses is a

...gray spirit yearning in desire  
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,  
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

Stevens' Ulysses too looks forward to going

....behind the symbols  
To that which they symbolized, away  
From the rumors of the speech-full domes...

The emphasis in the two poems is, admittedly, different: Tennyson presents a Ulysses who is to be admired for the heroic nature of his search for knowledge; Stevens' emphasis is not on the heroism of the seeker of knowledge but on the knowledge itself. Indeed, Ulysses, as an individuated character, is far less present in Stevens' poem than in Tennyson's. This, however, does not vitiate the strong influence of Tennyson on Stevens' conception of Ulysses. Stevens' poem, in fact, can be read as an answer to Tennyson. The Ulysses in Stevens' poem, like the one in Tennyson's, seeks to "touch the happy lands." But he recognizes that exploring the "unknown world" is not a navigational but a mental feat. And he understands that "There is no map of Paradise."

Thus, the author of *In Memoriam* stands between Dante and Stevens. Similarly, the author of *Delia* may be a more immediate influence of Lowell. In

an appendix to his book *Robert Lowell: Life and Art*, Stephen Gould Axelrod lists the poems copied by Lowell into a notebook during his years at Kenyon College and for some time thereafter. The list is not long, and among the handful of Renaissance works included Axelrod lists Samuel Daniel's "Ulysses and the Siren."<sup>10</sup> This poem, which runs to some seventy-two lines, is written in the form of a debate between the two characters of the title. The subject of the debate is the question: which brings greater joy, idleness or toil? The Siren urges Ulysses to "joy the day in mirth... And spend the night in sleepe."<sup>11</sup> He argues the necessity of braving dangers to achieve fame and honor, and tells he that "To spend the time luxuriously / Becomes not men of worth." This same conflict, between idleness among females and toil among men, figures importantly in Lowell's poem. Lowell's Ulysses awakens on a couch beside Circe, at the beginning of that work, and the speaker muses:

What is more uxorious than waking at five  
with the sun and three hours free?

Circe, in Lowell's poem, hold Ulysses in her thrall as much as Daniel's siren would like to. Lowell's Ulysses has written off the "fame and honor" so prized by Daniel's Ulysses to live with his enchantress:

On Circe's small island,  
he grew from narrowness —  
by pettiness,  
he ennobled himself to fit the house.

Daniel's poem ends with the Siren's observation that

...beauty hath created been,  
T'undo, or be undone.

Likewise, Lowell's Ulysses, lying in "his place of honor on the couch," asks himself,

"Why am I my own fugitive,  
because her beauty  
made me feel as other men?"

In "Ulysses and Circe," then, Circe's beauty has undone Ulysses; and at the end of the poem, the attractiveness of Penelope, "still / The best bosom in the room," drives him to murder.

Both Stevens and Lowell, then, derive the conceptions of Ulysses largely from Dante, whose version of Homer's hero was given new prominence in the first decades of the twentieth century by Ezra Pound. But this influence is in one instance tied to that of Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and in the other perhaps supplemented by that of Samuel Daniel. To be sure, I do not mean to deny credit to either Stevens or Lowell for the creative power on both their parts

that was necessary to the composition of both "The Sail of Ulysses" and "Ulysses and Circe." Yet I do maintain that an examination of previous works on Ulysses by other poets can, to a surprising extent, help to account for the different ways in which both Stevens and Lowell see and shape the character of Ulysses.

#### NOTES

1. Wallace Stevens, "The Sail of Ulysses," in *The Palm at the End of the Mind* (New York: Vintage, 1967), p. 388. Neither this book nor Lowell's *Day by Day* numbers lines, so for consistency I have eliminated line numbers throughout this paper.

2. Robert Lowell, "Ulysses and Circe," in *Day by Day* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1977), p. 5. These lines, of course also evoke Hardy's "I Look Into My Glass" ("...And view my wasting skin...") and Yeats' "The Tower" ("What shall I do with this absurdity.../.../ Decrepid age that has been tied to me / As to a dog's tail?...").

3. Wallace Stevens, "The World as Meditation," in *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, p. 382.

4. Joseph N. Riddel, *The Clairvoyant Eye* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), p. 227.

5. These quotations are from the versions of these poems printed in Robert Lowell, *History* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, 1973), P. 159. The earlier versions appear in *Notebook* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, 1970).

6. Dante *Inferno*, trans. Mark Musa, in Maynard Mack, general editor, *Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces*, fourth edition, Vol. I (New York: Norton, 1979), p. 957.

7. Jerome Mazzaro, *The Poetic Themes of Robert Lowell* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965). Connections between Dante and Lowell are cited throughout the book. See the index.

8. Robert Buttel, *Wallace Stevens: The Making of Harmonium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967). Again, see the index for connections between Tennyson and Stevens.

9. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Ulysses," in M.H. Abrams, general editor, *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, third edition, Vol. II (New York: Norton, 1974), p. 1025. Stevens' Ulysses too speaks of arches:

The living man in the present place,  
Always, the particular thought  
Among Plantagenet abstractions,  
Always and always, the difficult inch,  
On which vast arches of space  
Repose, always, the credible thought  
From which incredible systems spring,

10. Stephen Gould Axelrod, *Robert Lowell: Life and Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 245. Axelrod lists the poem as if it were two poems – "Ulysses," "The Siren" – but clearly this is simply the result of an error in transcription.

11. Samuel Daniel, "Ulysses and the Siren," in *Poems and A Defence of Ryme*, edited by Arthur Colby Sprague (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 161.

## COMMUNICATIONS

### *The Lightning Field* and the Jar

When my daughter promised me an unusual art experience during my visit with her in New Mexico, I was not prepared for possible encounters with rattlesnakes or for a mandatory twenty-four hour stay in an isolated log cabin – or for any of the other happenings that are part of viewing an art object called *The Lightning Field*. Linda's letter referred in very general terms to a piece of land sculpture located a few hours from Albuquerque. She well knew that her sketchiness would arouse my perverse taste for adventure (I am a pushover for mysterious unknowns). I accepted her invitation by return mail, thereby consenting to a journey toward a wholly unexpected epiphany. The weekend I was to spend on a remote, semiarid tract of ranch land in west-central New Mexico would become the most perplexing and disturbing, yet the most strangely satisfying aesthetic encounter in my life.

Previewing information about *The Lightning Field* came from the Dia Art Foundation in New York, the organization that commissioned and maintains the work. Although the memorandum concerned itself primarily with the practicalities of confirming reservations and of finding the foundation office in Quemado, it included some stipulations that immediately suggested this was not going to be a conventional tour of an art gallery. The *Field* had to be visited over at least a twenty-four hour period, and visitors – who were to number no more than three at once – were to spend one or two nights at a former homestead adjacent to the *Field* where food and lodging would be provided. (Our guide informed us later that many visitors came alone.) A foundation vehicle would provide transportation from the Quemado office to the site of the *Field*, an hour's ride away; we were to arrive in Quemado at 1:00 P.M. and to plan to leave the *Field* at noon on the day of departure.

It was not until I was seated in the back seat of Linda's ancient Volkswagen bug on a three-and-a-half hour ride out of Albuquerque that I again realized that I did not know what we were going to see. But my questions about *the Lightning Field* fell on deaf ears. Both Linda and her friend Roger Sweet, the conceptual artist and teacher who had generously shared his invitation with us, refused to offer any details.

My own work in literary criticism had led me into the often obscure realms of aesthetic theory. I had a general notion of what experimental and conceptual art involved. Apparently, *The Lightning Field* was going to combine both of these nontraditional approaches to art. Roger, who knew more than he was telling, and Linda, who always enjoyed surprising me, diverted my attention to the breathtaking scenes that surrounded us. The grandeur of the mountain ranges and the vastness of the sky above them preempted my discussion of artistic theory. I silently remembered Emerson's reference to the Andes as "temples" (in his poem "The Problem") and I understood more completely than ever before why he concluded that "Art might obey, but not surpass" the beauty of nature. I did not know then that *The Lightning Field* would make the distinction irrelevant.

Abruptly, we were in Quemado, a half-hour ahead of schedule. The almost deserted town (population, 250) had one open cafe where the Dia Foundation guide spotted us almost immediately. We were soon on the last leg of our journey, and it did not take long to realize why the foundation provided its own four-wheel drive transportation: the VW would have foundered on the ruts and patches of red mud that we negotiated.

"Must have rained last night," was our guide's unconcerned comment as we swayed and bounced in unison, four abreast on the seat of the pickup truck. She had been driv-

ing in this country all her life, she told us; all of eighteen, and entering Brigham Young University in a few weeks, she was as matter-of-fact about the terrain as about the red ants and rattlesnakes she nonchalantly warned us to avoid. I was beginning to sense the full implications of experiencing an "isolated work of land art."

We came to a log cabin and assorted outbuildings. Behind them I beheld a wide expanse of clouds and sky over an empty landscape. Only later did I realize that I had been looking directly at *The Lightning Field* but literally did not see it. The explanation of this paradox is simple enough: in the artist's description of the work (*Artforum*, April 1980, pp. 52-59) he writes that "during the mid-portion of the day 70 to 90 percent of the poles become virtually invisible due to the high angle of the sun." A subsequent statement in De Maria's text is more enigmatic: "The invisible is real."

Even as I stood there, the light shifted, the glare lessened — and the real became visible. Before me lay a grid of shiny poles in perpendicular rows. This sometimes invisible work of art turned out to be 400 highly polished stainless steel poles arranged in parallel rows to form a rectangle one kilometer wide and one mile long, with sixteen poles in each kilometer-wide row and twenty-five poles in each mile-long row. The guide provided some of the specifics; the *Artforum* feature, others. Both sources confirmed my growing conviction that the invisible/real paradox was only the first of several coexisting contrarities.

Its genesis revealed another set of contradictions. It is one man's conception, but it is the creation of many men other than the artist. *The Lightning Field* originated in a note by Walter De Maria in 1969. Its physical form was completed on November 1, 1977, and involved the work of surveyors, engineers, technicians, and construction teams. I remembered that in the tradition of the conceptual art movement the idea or concept of a work is its prime aspect; the execution becomes a mechanical task not dependent on the artist's craft or skill. In the case of *The Lightning Field* the positioning of the rectangular grid, the elevation of the terrain, and the placement and height of each pole were determined by an aerial survey, a computer analysis, and a land survey. Each pole was cut to its own individual length within a tolerance of 1/100 of an inch, so that the plane of the tips would evenly support an imaginary sheet of glass. The poles range in height from 15 feet to 26 feet 9 inches, with average pole height at 20 feet 7½ inches. The spaces between the poles are accurate to within 1/25 of an inch. The poles are set in concrete foundations and have heavy carbon steel pipes as a core. In the most memorable of the construction photographs that our guide showed us the installation crew, in dirt-covered blue jeans and mud-encrusted boots, gingerly handled the stainless steel casings wearing spanking white gloves.

Another of the paradoxes is the fact that *The Lightning Field* is also nature's creation. In De Maria's words, "The land is not the setting for the work but a part of the work." Much time and effort were expended in finding the right kind of natural elements. The states of California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, and Texas were searched by truck over a five-year period before the location in New Mexico was selected. The terrain has not been altered to accommodate the sculpture. The plant and animal life that the habitat naturally sustains remains unchanged — including, our guide reminded us, its rattlesnake population. (Fortunately, I cannot vouch for the rattlesnakes personally. I was sufficiently appalled when I saw the emergency kit for rattlesnake bites among the first-aid supplies in the cabin.)

The sunset that evening confirmed nature's hand in the rendering of *The Lightning Field* experience. In truth, it would have been an awesomely beautiful sight with or without the 400 poles it transformed into sheaths of gleaming copper. The mountains in the distance, the clouds overhead, the entire terrain as far as one could see turned brilliant shades of orange and red and yellow. But *The Lightning Field* somehow appropri-

ated the sunset and turned the most natural of phenomena into an integral part of itself. The syzygetic effect was total. Again in Emerson's words, but in a different context from his, "I yielded myself to the perfect whole."

The full impact of the contradictions involved did not strike me until the next morning. My heightened response in the morning hours bore out Thoreau's maxim that "all memorable events... transpire in morning time." De Maria may have been guaranteeing a morning experience for every viewer when he made a twenty-four hour stay one of the conditions for a visit. Whether he was intentionally heeding Thoreau's injunction or not, he echoes another of Thoreau's favorite themes — the need to totally immerse oneself in an environment in order to fully experience it — when he points out that "the primary experience takes place with the *Lightning Field*." It did for me early that morning.

As I walked among the polished posts, gazing down the mathematically precise rows on all sides of me, I had to stop occasionally to choose my footing on the uneven ground and to cast a wary eye out for rattlers. Patches of scrub grass dotted what would ordinarily have been grazing land, tufts of wildflowers bloomed haphazardly among the sparse vegetation, insects buzzed by, and tiny birds flitted about, every so often lighting on the tops of the stainless steel poles. The contradictions once again merged into a unified whole as they had done at sunset the day before, but this time the immensity of the juxtaposition hit home. The sculpture that surrounded me was a piece of art, by definition a man-created object, and of a different order of things from the natural phenomena in which it was set. The coterminousness of this man-conceived, technologically created thing with the spontaneously generated scrub grass, wildflowers, birds, and insects jarred my sensibilities: the fertility, mutability, and chaotic randomness of nature somehow became part of the imposed order, infecundity, and fixed purposeness of art. The poles would not multiply as the living things would, but neither would the poles die. In De Maria's *Lightning Field* both orders of things had achieved the kind of immortality we attribute to art.

A sense of *deja vu* nagged at me. Yet I knew I had never seen anything remotely like these parallel rows of shiny poles stretching out amidst the flora and fauna of the high ranch country of New Mexico. The strange novelty of the experience stirred a memory of a perception previously acknowledged in another place and another time. In a flash the words came to me, "It took dominion everywhere... It did not give of bird or bush" — fragments of a poem about a jar atop a hill in Tennessee. Wallace Stevens' "Anecdote of the Jar" was the connection, and the relevancy was clear. Like Stevens' jar, the poles "took dominion everywhere" and "made the slovenly wilderness / Surround" them. In the same way, "The wilderness rose up to" the poles, "And sprawled around, no longer wild." The jar, wrote Stevens, was "gray and bare" and "did not give of bird or bush, / Like nothing else in Tennessee." So it was with the poles of New Mexico: they did not bear life, but they somehow absorbed and dominated it.

Even more to the point was my ambivalence toward this isolated piece of conceptual land art. Was it, as some have concluded about Stevens' poem, a bad joke? What was I doing out in this deserted waste looking at 400 poles meticulously mounted on the range? If it were as devoid of meaning and purpose as it most certainly was of practical usefulness, why did it arouse a sense of wonder and awe in me? My last question answered my other questions because if it succeeded in being beautiful, in whatever sense, it warranted its existence. Its beauty was beyond dispute. Art needs no further justification.

We left *The Lightning Field*, on schedule, that day at noon. The poles were again dissolving images in a shimmery haze. Euphoric, I took a final look, basking in the satisfaction that my first full-fledged conceptual art experience had been an unqualified suc-

cess. I had seen *The Lightning Field*, and it was mine.

"Too bad it didn't storm again last night," our guide commented as we bounced over the cow-path road toward Quemado. "You missed the lightning by just one night." Euphoric indeed! I had seen *The Lightning Field* sans lightning – and had not noticed. Three of the five photographs in the *Artforum* feature are of the field with lightning. But the article explains, "The light is as important as the lightning." Good thing, too, since the number of lightning storms that pass over the sculpture is approximately three per thirty days during the lightning season, which lasts from May to early September. The odds are weighted heavily against seeing *The Lightning Field* with lightning. But no matter. *The Lightning Field*, with or without lightning, is an electrifying and enlightening work of art. Wallace Stevens, whose poetry reveled in the conundrum of art, might have found it a subject more evocative than a jar on a Tennessee hilltop.

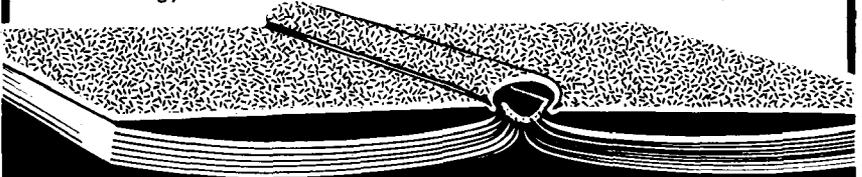
LEA NEWMAN

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## **At Last, the Real Distinguished Thing**

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## Crude Compoundings Wallace Stevens' Prophecy of the Possible

M.T. MARSHALL

**T**he first indication of Wallace Stevens' goal for "Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction" is found in the title itself. A supreme fiction seems an impossibly weighty undertaking for any single poem, particularly if one considers the beliefs that this fiction is intended to replace. Stevens does not actually promise a supreme fiction, however; he promises notes toward that end. Within the limits of this objective he is then able to approach his immense topic.

The poem opens with a description of the mental preparation necessary to begin this quest for untruth, the formulation of a supreme fiction:

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

You must become an ignorant man again  
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye  
And see it clearly in the idea of it.

Never suppose an inventing mind as source  
Of this idea nor for that mind compose  
A voluminous master folded in his fire.

(ll. 1-9)

The words describe a coming of age: The ephebe, the young man, discards the old interpretations of existence. The purgation is absolute:

How clean the sun when seen in its idea,  
Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven  
That has expelled us and our images...

(ll. 10-12)

These lines strip existence to its bare particulars, to fact without a cover of interpretation. Stevens forces perception to descend to the level of pure physical fact, devoid of "us and our images." He sees this first level of reality as something almost antihuman. Man is a newcomer to the world and feels a stranger to prehuman, objective nature:

There was a muddy center before we breathed  
There was a myth before the myth began,  
Venerable and articulate and complete.

From this the poem springs: that we live in a place  
That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves  
And hard it is in spite of blazoned days.

(ll. 73-78)

Names, metaphors, myths, and all the other productions of language are after all man-made abstractions; indeed, the very concept of humankind is an abstraction from the state of simply being. Stevens devotes the entire first section of "Notes" to a description of the condition of bare existence. This landscape is the starting point from which he then builds necessary and power-giving abstractions, specifically that of "major man," the figure who consciously creates fictions, the capable poet:

The major abstraction is the idea of man  
And major man is its exponent, abler  
In the abstract than in his singular,

More fecund as principle than particle,  
Happy fecundity, flor-abundant force,  
In being more than an exception, part,

Though an heroic part, of the communal.

(ll. 190-196)

Stevens offers this figure of the "major man" not as a placebo but as a necessity:

It is of him, ephebe, to make, to confect  
The final elegance, not to console  
Nor sanctify, but plainly to propound.

(ll. 208-210)

This major man is an image of what might be, of what is possible. The need for a superhuman image is made clear in the last section of the poem, "It Must Give Pleasure." In the middle section, Stevens describes in the subtitle itself a second critical feature of the creative imagination, "It Must Change." He presents an example of an art work which does not change, the statue of General Du Puy, and says that it comes to nothing in the end:

On Sundays, lawyers in their promenades  
Approached this strongly-heightened effigy  
To study the past, and doctors, having bathed

Themselves with care, sought out the nerveless frame  
Of a suspension, a permanence, so rigid  
That it made the General a bit absurd,

Changed his true flesh to an inhuman bronze.  
There never had been, never could be, such  
A man. The lawyers disbelieved, the doctors

Said that as keen, illustrious ornament,  
As a setting for geraniums, the General,  
The very Place Du Puy, in fact, belonged

Among our more vestigial states of mind.  
Nothing had happened because nothing had changed.  
Yet the General was rubbish in the end.

(ll. 259-273)

General Du Puy's statue is discarded finally, because it speaks of neither reality nor the imagination. In *The Necessary Angel*, Stevens discusses the failing of art that does not change, in reference to another equestrian statue, that of Andrew Jackson. He incorporates Coleridge's theory of fancy versus imagination:

This work is a work of fancy.... Fancy, then, is an exercise of selection from among objects already supplied by association, a selection made for purposes which are not then and therein being shaped but have been already fixed.... The statue may be dismissed, not without speaking of it again as a thing that at least makes us conscious of ourselves as we were, if not how we are.... That it is a work of fancy precludes it from being a work of the imagination. A glance at it shows it be unreal.<sup>1</sup>

We see here the nucleus of Stevens' perceptions of imagination, art, and the artist. He states that there are works which are neither real nor of the imagination. This seeming paradox is resolved only by recognizing the above distinction between fancy and imagination. Fancy merely reorders already existing materials; the imagination involves actual redefinition of matter and therefore creates something new. Since works of fancy tell of the past, they are not worthless, but Stevens has in mind for the artist a job far different from that of chronicler. He decrees for art the responsibility of telling us what we are and how we might be. The process and products of creativity are neither of the imagination nor of reality alone, but a marriage of the two:

Two things of opposite natures seem to depend  
On one another, as a man depends  
On a woman, day on night, the imagined

On the real. This is the origin of change.  
Winter and spring, cold copulars, embrace  
And forth the particulars of rapture come.

(ll. 274-279)

Opposites are finally united within one character, the Canon Aspirin. His sister, the moon, signifies a condition of bare fact. Stevens endows her with two daughters who are likewise stripped of any fiction:

The words they spoke were voices that she heard.  
She looked at them and saw then as they were  
And what she felt fought off the barest phrase.

(ll. 517-519)

The Canon Aspirin himself confronts extremes of reality and of his own mind in one epic passage:

When at long midnight the Canon came to sleep  
And normal things had yawned themselves away,  
The nothingness was a nakedness, a point,

Beyond which fact could not progress as fact.  
Thereon the learning of the man conceived  
Once more night's pale illuminations, gold

Beneath, far underneath, the surface of  
His eye and audible in the mountain of  
His ear, the very material of his mind.

So that he was the ascending wings he saw  
And moved on them in orbit's outer stars  
Descending to the children's bed, on which

They lay. Forth then with huge pathetic force  
Straight to the utmost crown of night he flew.  
The nothingness was a nakedness, a point

Beyond which thought could not progress as thought.  
He had to choose. but it was not a choice  
Between excluding things. It was not a choice

Between, but of. He chose to include the things  
That in each other are included, the whole,  
The complicate, the amassing harmony.

(ll. 526-546)

A moment is reached between lines 528-541 when fact and thought terminate because there is no mind left to order matter. At the instant of extinction the imagination ignites, bringing forth a paradoxical movement inward to "the very material of his mind" and outward toward the sky. Neither bare fact nor bare intellect suffices as a destination for Stevens' major man. His choice

cannot be between one extreme and the other, but must consist of both reality and the imagined:

He imposes orders as he thinks of them,  
As the fox and snake do. It is a brave affair.  
Next he builds capitols...

(ll. 547-549)

Stevens has come through a process of purification, a return to the foundations of existence, physical and mental. He now begins an evolutionary development starting at a prehuman, instinctive level, where the mind first meets objective nature. Reality and the imagination are united in a synthesis of fact and thought which creates and imposes order on the world. Suddenly, Stevens makes a strange pronouncement:

... But to impose is not  
To discover. To discover an order as of  
A season, to discover summer and know it,

To discover winter and know it well, to find,  
Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all,  
Out of nothing to have come on major weather,

It is possible, possible, possible. It must  
Be possible. It must be that in time  
The real will from its crude compoundings come,

Seeming, at first, a beast disgorged, unlike  
Warmed by a desperate milk. To find the real,  
To be stripped of every fiction except one,

The fiction of an absolute — Angel,  
Be silent in your luminous cloud and hear  
The luminous melody of proper sound.

(ll. 553-567)

Harold Bloom, in an essay on this poem, describes these stanzas as Stevens' "own version of a Romantic faithless faith."<sup>2</sup> The litany "It is possible, possible, possible. It must /Be possible..." becomes, then, a hopeless if stirring supplication, a desperation to actually discover an order in nature, an order which is not there.

The above interpretation fits neatly into the Romantic tradition of searching for a first principle in nature. But Stevens is not a Romantic, if indeed Romanticism entails belief in an other-than-human order. Everything in his poetry and prose points to a total acceptance of a natural world which is unpremeditated, chaotic, almost antihuman in its utter mindlessness. Stevens starts from

this concept of unredeemed nature, and all of his writings mark a working through of a system whereby order might be created by the power of the capable imagination. All of "Notes" builds on the idea that we must accept ourselves as the origin of our own beliefs, our fictions. The notion that Stevens suddenly panics and cries for an intrinsic order in nature, ignores his unremitting quest for naked comprehension throughout this poem. He dares to consider reality distilled to its bare particulars, and thought to its last abstraction. When the Canon Aspirin progresses from imposing to discovering order, something quite different from desperation is at hand. Stevens is contemplating a time when thought and fact meet, "stripped of every fiction except one," and fuse so that imagination and reality assume each other's qualities:

... It must be that in time  
The real will from its crude compoundings come,

Seeming, at first, a beast disgorged, unlike,  
Warmed by a desperate milk....

(ll. 560-563)

These lines are a vision of nature becoming infused with consciousness, primitive but evolving. This concept is revolutionary, if not the creation of Stevens alone. Hegel, in *Reason in History*, offers a similar though not identical image: the World Spirit developing from chaos into consciousness. Both Stevens and Hegel see thought and matter coming together, although Hegel's theory has a spiritual element not present in Stevens' relentless abandonment of illusions.

Why, then, does Stevens call for one surviving fiction? What is this "fiction of an absolute — Angel"? Answers are suggested in Stevens' criticism of Sigmund Freud. In *The Necessary Angel*, he attacks Freud for forcefully destroying religious and cultural beliefs, but this is precisely what Stevens himself does.<sup>3</sup> There remains a fundamental difference between these two men, however: Freud laments that people will probably continue to rely on illusions for some time to come; Stevens declares that we will always need illusion, even though we will know it for what it is.

The fiction of an absolute angel is the balancing counterpoint to the mind's absorption into reality. The image of an angel maintains the illusion of the sublime, of the imagination soaring above reality. Stevens' angel looks down toward "the violent abyss" and leaps, but never touches ground:

What am I to believe? If the angel in his cloud,  
Serenely gazing at the violent abyss,  
Plucks on his strings to pluck abysmal glory,

Leaps downward through evening's revelations, and  
On his spreaden wings, needs nothing but deep space,  
Forgets the gold centre, the golden destiny,

Grows warm in the motionless motion of his flight,  
Am I that imagine this angel less satisfied?  
Are the wings his, the lapis-haunted air?

Is it he or is it I that experience this?  
Is it I then that keep saying there is an hour  
Filled with expressible bliss, in which I have

No need, am happy, forget need's golden hand,  
Am satisfied without solacing majesty,  
And if there is an hour there is a day,

There is a month, a year, there is a time  
In which majesty is a mirror of the self:  
I have not but I am and as I am, I am.

These external regions, what do we fill them with  
Except reflections, the escapades of death,  
Cinderella fulfilling herself beneath the roof?

(568-588)

The angel is not at heart believable; Stevens has long before rejected the condition of pure intellect. Yet this image satisfies by the subtlest means: though the angel cannot be possessed insofar as it does not exist, the act of imagining the angel, of meditating upon transcendence, gives pleasure. Stevens follows with an expression of exuberance:

Whistle aloud, too weedy wren. I can  
Do all that angels can. I enjoy like them,  
Like men besides, like men in light secluded,

Enjoying angels....

(ll. 589-592)

This supreme fiction has all the elements of escapism without succumbing to self-delusion. One part of the imagination will be reserved for fantasy, for "...reflections, the escapades of death, / Cinderella fulfilling herself beneath the roof...." In this realm of fantasy, of fiction, we are free of our bond with reality, we can "Do all that angels can." But we will remain quite aware that we fantasize. Stevens does not see such awareness as debilitating; indeed, self-consciousness enhances the act of creative imagining: like angels, we enjoy the ability to transcend corporeal existence while appreciating as men the luxury of such moments.

Stevens' major man, his capable poet, is a double-minded being. One side of this figure is utterly submerged in reality, so much so that his imagination takes its substance from physical existence and gives back to the world a struc-

ture, a pattern, until he does not have to impose order, it has become a part of nature, he may "Out of nothing... come on major weather." Another part of this man willfully preserves a myth of semi-divinity, of the sublime. He uses his imagination to create that which defies all bounds of reality. These creations have no substance or temporal presence and exist only in the process of imagining them, in the interval of the angel's leaping downwards.

Stevens' philosophy of the necessary angel contains the risk of removing from art the sublime element in creative imagination. If all pleasure of creativity occurs in the moment of imagining, why transform these visions into substance, into works of art? Stevens responds to this question in the last canto of "Notes" with his address to a soldier:

Soldier, there is a war between the mind  
And sky, between thought and day and night. It is  
For that the poet is always in the sun,

Patches the moon together in his room  
To his Virgilian cadences, up down,  
Up down. It is a war that never ends.

Yet it depends on yours. The two are one.  
They are a plural, a right and left, a pair,  
Two parallels that meet if only in

The meeting of their shadows or that meet  
In a book in a barrack, a letter from Malay.  
But your war ends. And after it you return

With six meats and twelve wines or else without  
To walk another room... Monsieur and comrade,  
The soldier is poor without the poet's lines,

His petty syllabi, the sounds that stick,  
Inevitably modulating, in the blood.  
And war for war, each his its gallant kind.

How simply the fictive hero becomes the real;  
How gladly with proper words the soldier dies,  
If he must, or lives on the bread of faithful speech.

(ll. 631-651)

The soldier is a real man, he reads books in a barrack, his war ends. Stevens compares him with a poet and his intellectual "war between the mind / And sky," a war that never ends. These two men and their respective wars are not really parallel, but intertwined: "...It is a war that never ends. / Yet it depends on yours. The two are one." The sublime imagination and the order-discover-

ing imagination form a fertile opposition: "They are a plural, a right and left, a pair...."

These final stanzas reveal Stevens' view of artistic potential, in a manner which is at once deliberate and difficult. "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" is a work of poetry with a philosophical underpinning. When this poem is read without awareness of its philosophical orientation, its images seem to change in random fashion and the ending appears to be an afterthought, a tacked-on defense of art. Once "Notes" is read with an eye toward theory, the poem's organization make sense as a painstaking construction of a cosmology. Each section of the poem builds upon a system of revelation and logic which bears fruit in the last stanzas, where Stevens explains the purpose of his art: "The soldier is poor without the poet's lines." The poet's lines communicate the sublime without containing sublimity in any known sense of possession. The soldier reading the poet's words incorporates these fictions into his own life, he becomes the poet's words: "How simply the fictive hero becomes the real." And in the act of believing fictions – willfully or not – the transcendent vision finds embodiment in reality.

#### NOTES

1. Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel* (New York: Knopf, 1951) pp. 10-11.
2. Harold Bloom, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction: A Commentary," in *Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Marie Borroff, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1963) p. 91.
3. Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel* (New York: Knopf, 1951) p. 14.



**WLWE**

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# An Endless Meditation: A Reading of Wallace Stevens' Prefaces to the Dialogues of Paul Valéry

JOANNE B. KARPINSKI

**I**n "The Figure of Youth as Virile Poet," Wallace Stevens observes that ...anyone who has read a long poem day after day as, for example, *The Faerie Queene*, knows how the poem comes to possess the reader and how it naturalizes him in its own imagination and liberates him there.<sup>1</sup>

Both the matter and manner of Stevens' two prefaces to the Bollingen translation of the *Dialogues* of Paul Valéry illustrate this process of possession, naturalization, and liberation.

On first reading these prefaces, one is struck by the affinity between statements made by Valéry in 1921 and lines of poetry written by Stevens twenty and thirty years later. Large portions of the prefaces consist simply of abstracts from Valéry's texts, for which Stevens' comments provide appreciation more than explication. Gradually, however, one perceives that like the dialogues themselves, the two prefaces are meditations in which a seminal idea is fully exfoliated. Stevens' prefaces are "recreations" of Valéry's ideas; thus, they reflect the creative activity of Valéry as well as that of Stevens in the complex and subtle relationship of minds that Stevens describes as possession, naturalization, and liberation.

The moment of liberation is difficult to recognize, for it consists — as is typical for Stevens — of an absence. It appears as those of Valéry's themes which Stevens chooses not to re-create. In the preface to "Eupalinos, or the Architect," Stevens refuses the undermining influence of the Anti-Socrates' self-doubts; to a lesser extent, in "Dance and the Soul," he rejects the "Dionysian" aspect of the dance which results in the extinction of the dancer.

Both prefaces begin by focusing on the form of the dialogue, and in particular on Valéry's own reflections on the form. This is typical Stevens methodology; one begins with the artifact — the rock, the pineapple, the "vulgate of experience" — and then enters into "the never-ending meditation." Two aspects of the form especially appeal to Stevens — rigor and rhetoric. Both are admirable to Stevens because they rely upon precise use of language.

This precision affects Stevens sensually, intellectually, and emotionally. It is first of all "exhilarating," a sensation which Stevens associates with Valéry's description of the windy seashore in "Eupalinos." Next, Stevens sees Valéry as substituting the progression of the mind for imagery to produce intellectual exhilaration, citing the conclusion of "Eupalinos" for this effect. Finally, in "Dance and the Soul," Stevens feels that "this rhetoric, the eloquent expression of that which is precisely true," produces an "irresistible compulsion" and a regenerative power. In his *Adagia*, Stevens suggests the existence of a "degree of perception at which what is real and what is imagined are one, a state of clair-

voyant observation accessible... to the acutest poet." This state, the clear goal of his own poetry, sounds much like his descriptions of Valéry's technique.

The selected passages from Valéry's correspondence concerning the dialogues which Stevens introduces into the prefaces stress Valéry's association of rigor with fortuity — an association which, for Stevens, was one of the criteria for distinguishing the method of the poet from the method of the philosopher.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the publisher's demand that the text for *Architectures* be precisely 115,800 characters in length yielded the flexible form of the dialogue, and Valéry's self-professed ignorance of the history of dance and pre-eminence of Mallarmé's *Divagations* in this area suggested that the form and style of "Dance and the Soul" demonstrate Mallarmé's formulations. These selections show Valéry engaged in a poesis similar to Stevens' own.

As Stevens moves from investigating the form of the dialogues to contemplating the ideas developed in them, he notes that in both "Eupalinos" and "Dance and the Soul," one finds "the body as source and the act in relation to the body." This is essential to Stevens, who asserts in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" that "The real is only the base. But it is the base."

Up to this point, Stevens' procedure in considering the two dialogues has been so similar that it has been possible to generalize about both prefaces. But as Stevens turns his attention to the ideas presented in "Dance and the Soul," he introduces a value judgement:

"Dance and the Soul" is a lesser work than "Eupalinos," since it does not contain the proliferation of ideas which characterizes "Eupalinos." Socrates is always and everywhere proliferation. In this dialogue, however, he confines himself to the proliferation of a single idea.

One might take exception to the judgment of "lesser" on the grounds that breadth and finesse cannot be weighed in the same scale. Nevertheless, the judgment reflects Stevens' belief that imaginative abundance is "the cure of the ground and of ourselves" for the poverty of reality.<sup>3</sup> It is noteworthy that Stevens' preface to the "greater" work more clearly shows Stevens' liberation from the thought of Valéry. For this reason, his commentary on "Dance and the Soul" will be examined first, and more briefly.

Stevens' approach to "Dance and the Soul" echoes the distinctions he made in "So-and-So Reclining on Her Couch." There is a mechanism, the dancer Athikte, who corresponds to Projection A, "without lineage or language." The conceptions of her dance which are entertained by Eryximachus, Phaedrus, and Socrates combine to form Projection B, the "practick" of the creator. The dialogue itself, in which the dancer and these various interpretations of her dance ("the thing as idea and the idea as thing") contend for the reader's attention, is the final Projection, C. Through the reader's participation in the interaction of these projections, says Stevens, "he realizes, for the first time, the excitement of a meaning as it is revealed at once in thought and act."

In "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens wrote:

There was a will to change, a necessitous

And present way, a presentation, a kind  
Of volatile world,...

... The freshness of transformation is  
The freshness of a world. It is our own,  
It is ourselves, the freshness of ourselves.

This argument resonates with the observation of Socrates cited by Stevens in the preface to "Dance and the Soul:"

that exaltation and that vibration of life, that supremacy of tension, that transport into the highest agility one is capable of, have the virtues and potencies of flame;... the shames, the worries, the silliness, and the monotonous foods of existence are consumed within it.

However, Valéry's Socrates goes on to insist that this transformation takes place *in* the body, not in the imagination's representations of physical realities:

A body, by its simple force, and its act, is powerful enough to alter the nature of things more profoundly than ever the mind in its speculations and dreams was able to do!

This emphasis on the primacy of sensual experience can be found in the poems of Stevens' *Harmonium* – for example, in "Sunday Morning," where dance is a vital image – but not in works more contemporary with his writing of the prefaces. In "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," the mariners who arrive in the land of the lemon trees say, "We are back once more in the land of the elm trees, / But folded over, turned round." An alteration of words, not of motions, produces the change of nature for late Stevens.

Early in the preface, Stevens refers briefly to Louis Sechan's discussions of the possibly Dionysian character of "Dance and the Soul," a suggestion which Stevens dismisses with the comment, "it is certain that Valéry's own genius was Apollonian and that the Dionysian did not comport with it." While it is true that the genius of "Dance and the Soul" is Socrates, who not only represents the activity of reason but also reconciles physical and psychological sensation with the act of the mind, it is nevertheless true that Valéry shows the power of transformation as emanating from the dance of Athikte and not from Socrates' integration of observations about it.

Furthermore, Athikte's brief moment of transformed being leads to a (temporary) extinction of consciousness. When she awakens, she murmurs, "How well I feel... I was in thee, O movement – outside all things..." In other words, the moment of transformation remains inaccessible to the intellect, except by report. No doubt this is an important exception, and one which for Stevens is sufficient because it is possible. Valéry, however, is not so willing to identify the sufficient with the possible, as will become more apparent in the discussion of "Eupalinos."

Stevens makes a rather bold gesture when he focuses his attention to the

ideas discussed by Socrates and Phaedrus in their “dim habitations” on the banks of Ilissus – he assembles a number of Valéry’s statements into a poem of his own. The result sacrifices Valéry’s beautiful clarity for density, but reveals how much “Eupalinos” had “naturalized” Stevens. Isolated in this fashion, Valéry’s statements resemble Stevens’ *Adagia*. Three in particular stand out as Stevensesque:

Man... fabricates by abstraction.

Man’s deepest glances are those that go out to the void. They converge beyond the All.

If, then, the universe is the effect of some act, that act itself, the effect of a Being, and of a need, a thought, a knowledge, and a power which belong to that Being, it is then only by an act that you can rejoin the grand design, and undertake the imitation of that which has made all things. And that is to put oneself in the most natural way in the very place of God.

These statements themselves become increasingly abstract, and lead Stevens into a territory little enough explored in his own poetry – the Elysian fields of afterlife. Oddly enough, Stevens does not seem uncomfortable in this terra incognita, perhaps because the meditation he had made out of Valéry’s words led him there out of its own inner necessity. Also, the activity of the shades is on one level already familiar to Stevens, for it corresponds to a conception of his own:

. . . . Perhaps,  
After death, the non-physical people, in paradise,  
Itself non-physical, may, by chance, observe  
The green corn gleaming and experience  
The minor of what we feel.<sup>4</sup>

Socrates and Phaedrus begin to discuss aesthetics precisely because, in their incorporeal state, they experience only “the minor of” Beauty.

Stevens rhetorically expresses surprise that aesthetics should preoccupy Socrates and Phaedrus after death, rather than philosophy, religion, or revelation. He takes this to be a measure of the emphasis which Valéry placed on arriving at a true understanding of his craft, and a measure of the distinctly modern cast of Valéry’s thought. In arriving at these judgments – which are abundantly vindicated by the text – Stevens bypasses an issue which has important consequences for Valéry’s poetry, and which is resolved quite differently in Stevens’ own work.

Stevens notes in the preface that towards the end of the dialogue an Anti-Socrates emerges, as the answer to Socrates’ question:

Think you not that we ought to employ this boundless leisure which death leaves us, in... attempting other answers to the events that took

place, seeking in fine, to defend ourselves by illusions against nonexistence, as the living do against their existence?

However, he feels that this Socratic question (and answer) seem empty, on the grounds that the Elysian fields would be "the merest penal habitude" if existence in them were not as absolute as it is supposed to be eternal. He resolves the problem by concluding that Valéry is not concerned with the fortunes of Socrates and Phaedrus, but rather uses them as puppets, as Socrates suggests is the case in the closing lines of the dialogue.

If this sounds like an evasion rather than a resolution, it is probably because Stevens cannot conceive of the afterlife as other than a rhetorical device. Certainly Valéry does not suggest that these Elysian fields are a really existing place, but he does seem to portray the situation of Socrates and Phaedrus as a really existing state of mind, with attendant consequences. The chief consequence of Socrates' disembodied consciousness is an altered sense of possibility.

About halfway through the dialogue, Socrates remarks that a multitude of Socrateses were born with him, from whom little by little the Socrates stood out who was destined for the magistrates and the hemlock. When Phaedrus asks what became of the others, Socrates replies that he keeps them within himself, as his doubts and contradictions. By the end of the dialogue, one of these Anti-Socrateses, the constructor, assumes an active role in the discourse. Since the direction the dialogue has taken has led Socrates to conclude that "of all acts the most complete is that of constructing," the possibilities of Socrates the architect cause Socrates the thinker to regret his life. He feels that this regret is not intolerable only because it no longer has a living substance to give it exercise. In the opening lines of the dialogue, Socrates views possibility in another way. He observes that, in his incorporeal state, he is capable of witnessing the true flow of beings, as he had always wished to do when he was part of that fluid stream; from the vantage point which reveals the whole, however, he can no longer discern particulars. Thus, in two different ways, Socrates finds that the act of the mind has failed to suffice.

The imaginative faculty does not provide a cure for Valéry, at least in these dialogues, as it does for Stevens; this is because Valéry's "irreducible X" appears to be within the self, rather than in the reality that surrounds the self. While Stevens asserts that there is no diamond at the center (no single myth that explains and contains reality), Valéry finds doubt at the center of the diamond.<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that for Valéry there remains a radical disjunction between physical phenomena and the act of the mind, since his poems are nothing if not reconciliations of the two. What is apparent in the dialogues, however, is a keen sense that the possibility of discovery is tempered by the possibility of error, that the act of the mind involves risk.

In comparison, Stevens' conception of poesis emphasizes discovery over risk. Stevens does not doubt that it is possible to escape "the man-locked set." This conviction is the postulate on which his poetic activity is based; it is assumed, not proved. In effect, it is an act of faith. Thus, Stevens' eminently

reasoned approach to poetry grows out of a comfortable acceptance of the role of the irrational. Valéry, on the other hand, distrusts the irrational, and sees the imaginative reconciliation of reason and passion as desirable, but precarious and temporary. As a result, escape from "the man-locked set" seems much more difficult for him. It requires a much more abundant physical reality than the "poverty" of the late Stevens poems.

The consuming energy of Athikte's dance makes what is divine in mortal woman shine before the eyes of Socrates, but Athikte herself faints from the effort. In "Cimetière Marin," the act of the mind is rescued from the intimate, mortal worm and the paradoxes of Zeno by a resurgence of the physical world, wafted into the poet's reflections by a salty breeze. Narcissus breaks through his own myth only in death. Stevens, although he deprecates his insufficiencies in the personae of Crispin, Canon Aspirin, and Professor Eucalyptus, is not sabotaged by self-doubt. While Stevens asserts that "what is possible is real," Valéry states that "everything that is, masks for us, necessarily and irrevocably, *something that may be...*" (emphasis his). The presence of these themes gives to the beautifully-formed intellections of Valéry's poetry a quality of laughter in the dark — albeit a sublime laughter. Stevens, in contrast, has learned in his later years not to need "the impossible possible," nor to want it:

. . . . . I have  
 No need, am happy, forget need's golden hand,  
 Am satisfied without solacing majesty,  
 . . . . .  
 I have not but I am and as I am, I am.<sup>6</sup>

Valéry's Socrates despairs at not *being* the whole, but Stevens is satisfied with invoking the whole, and with being what he has become.

This attempt to follow the process of possession, naturalization, and liberation at work in Stevens' readings of Valéry has itself developed along the lines of the reading. It seems to have become a meditation, not an explanation. Perhaps it might best be considered a description, in the sense that Stevens understood this word: "Description is the difference that we make in what we see."

NOTES

1. Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel* (New York: Vintage, 1951), pp. 39-67.
2. Stevens, "A Collect of Philosophy," *Opus Posthumous* (New York: Knopf, 1957), p. 194.
3. Stevens, "The Rock," *Collected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1951) pp. 520-28.
4. Stevens, "Esthetique du Mal," *Collected Poems*, p. 320.
5. Paul Valéry, "The Graveyard by the Sea," from *Selected Works of Paul Valéry*, trans. by Graham Dunstin Martin (New York: New Directions, 1950), p. 44.
6. Stevens, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," *Collected Poems*, p. 341.

# On the Exquisite Plane of a Supreme Fiction

BENEDICT GIAMO

**B**orn in 1879, Wallace Stevens was nurtured by an age of American naturalism which proclaimed the death of God, the cool indifference of the universe, and the finite limitations of man in a deterministic setting. This nihilistic trinity, though convincing enough to send a writer like Crane to an early grave, stimulated in Stevens a desire for a poetry of transcendence, a poetry that would embody a thoroughly modern and superseding conception of the world as it stumbled into the twentieth century.

Though it is true that for Stevens the modern poet "lives in the world of Darwin and not in the world of Plato" (OP, 246),<sup>1</sup> this awareness did not necessitate an abandonment of faith, nor a passive resignation of one's capacity to emerge from the weighted world:

If one no longer believes in God (as truth), it is not possible merely to disbelieve; it becomes necessary to believe in something else. Logically, I ought to believe in essential imagination, but that has its difficulties. It is easier to believe in a thing created by the imagination... one's final belief must be in a fiction.

(L, 370)

The annihilation of God is thus the starting point in Stevens' system of thought as well as in his poetry; it is actually a human gift in disguise, placing the freedom of resolution in the individual consciousness of man. Although this spiritual vacuum releases man into an uncertain present and an unknown future, it empowers his imaginative self, so that the principle of order resides within, rather than being imposed from without. The observer in his mythic world is no longer peripheral, but becomes a central participant in a universe of supreme fictions. After all these years we can now begin to write our own biographies of the world and of each other:

There is not any haunt of prophecy,  
Nor any old chimera of the grave,  
Neither the golden underground, nor isle  
Melodious, where spirits gat them home,  
Nor visionary south, nor cloudy palm  
Remote on heaven's hill, that has endured  
As April's green endures; or will endure  
Like her remembrance of awakened birds,  
Or her desire for June and evening, tipped  
By the consummation of the swallow's wings

(SP, 6).

Stevens leads man out from the ancient darkness of Plato's cave, from that

unchanging world of absolutes in which the individual facts of experience have no significance. Whereas Plato's view of reality advocates a withdrawal from the particulars existent in the world so as to commune with the Mind of God, Stevens insists that the imagination must be grounded in a meaningful and tangible reality with which man interacts:

Divinity must live within herself:  
Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;  
Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued  
Elations when the forest blooms; gusty  
Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;  
All pleasures and all pains, remembering  
The bough of summer and the winter branch.  
These are the measures destined for her soul.

(SP, 5)

In contrast to Plato, Stevens maintains for the world of phenomena an ontological status of reality, such that they do not reflect, as illusory imitations, back to the Mind of God, but instead, present themselves to the individual mind, existing as a separate yet outreaching entity. By acknowledging this Cartesian dualism one can readily expand poetry beyond the morally constricted range of "hymns to the gods and praises of famous men."<sup>2</sup>

Stevens' appropriation of a dualistic system presupposes a recalcitrant reality which preserves its elemental apartness from the imaginative core of consciousness. Though it offers itself to the perceiving mind, it never completely dissolves into it. In many ways, reality seems to be somnambulistic, a natural world in rhythmic repose, and one which is in correspondence with Kenneth Burke's realm of non-symbolic movement:<sup>3</sup>

She sang beyond the genius of the sea.  
The water never formed to mind or voice,  
Like a body wholly body, fluttering  
Its empty sleeves

(SP, 97)

"She" may very well be that necessary angel of the imagination which creates from, yet reaches beyond, the strangeness of the sea, an apt illustration of symbolic action inextricably related to the universe of non-symbolic motion:

For she was the maker of the song she sang  
The ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea  
Was merely a place by which she walked to sing

(SP, 97)

The poles of imagination and reality in Stevens' system of thought are metaphysically antithetical. Yet if he stopped at this impervious disjunction we would not have the leap from metaphysics to poetry. It is from the tension between the two that the poem comes into being: "that we live in a place / That is

not our own and, much more, not ourselves / And hard it is in spite of blazoned days" (SP, 210). The difficulty of yielding to a material reality is compounded by its solid alien nature which exists in oblivious disregard of the impressions we have made upon it. The place itself is physically impenetrable even though countless civilizations have attached their designs to it. In the end, it evades their awkward clutch, effortlessly surpassing the conceptions of humanity which have tried to formulate it into a convenient phrase. Before long, the phrases themselves become part of the problem. We have to contend not only with an ultimately unknowable reality, but also with a lexicon of images which have clothed it in various decorative costumes patched out of whatever material available, from white silk to blue denim.

The imagination and reality do form a subject/object division in Stevens' worldview, but one does not take sides as if they were involved in some sort of political debate. Instead, by seeing them as a complex process, one comes to know them by engaging both, and by relying upon their interdependence in order to construct an exquisite and transcendent plane between the two realms of existence. For the poet living in the "radiant and productive world," the otherness of reality is altered as he, a purely perceptual being, moves through it. "The subject-matter of poetry," Stevens writes, "is not that 'collection of solid, static objects extended in space' but the life that is lived in the scene that it composes; and so reality is not that external scene but the life that is lived in it. Reality is things as they are" (NA, 25). The mobile imaginative consciousness gives the perceived things of the world words and, thus, poetic existence, while reality adheres itself to the imagination, and in its muteness suggests its own language. There is always an essence of the thing, a shadowy fiction, beneath the language of poetry which itself is but a fiction casing an ephemeral illumination upon it.

The language of poetry reflects the ability of the imagination to modify reality. It is necessarily abstract, that is, distinct from the concrete existence of "solid, static objects extended in space," precisely because it is the result of the dynamic interaction between imagination and reality. They are united on the "exquisite plane" of a supreme fiction, and their metaphoric incarnation provides for an evanescent conception of the world. "Poetry creates a fictitious existence on an exquisite plane. This definition must vary as the plane varies, an exquisite plane being merely illustrative" (OP, 180). For Stevens, the highly abstract language of his poetry matches his belief in the tentativeness of supreme fictions and thus the nature of man's being in the world. "Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction" is but one of many titles which suggest a prefatory circling about the subject-matter. In uncertainty he moves toward it, courts it, circles round it; it is like the movement of strangers meeting on a dark field, smelling the damp presence of outline.

The idea of a supreme fiction is central to Stevens' art. Through its manifestation, the split between both subject and object is ontologically maintained, yet epistemologically resolved. Contrary to Coleridge and the Romantics (influenced as they were by Schelling's Transcendental Idealism), the division does not dissolve into the fusion of subject and object. For Stevens, the poem does not serve this utilitarian purpose by "functioning like a foyer through

which we walk in order to enter the idea."<sup>4</sup> Rather, the fictive thing becomes the ideal; it is translated from the Mind of God to the imaginative creations of man. A supreme fiction, though providing a glimpse into the dualistic nature of imagination and reality, does not lead to nor reflect some higher divinity or Being. It simply is, and humbly illumines itself.

If we bracket all but the first line and last two lines of Stevens' poem, "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," two interdependent definitions of a fictive thing suggest themselves:

Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame...  
This will make widows wince. But fictive things  
Wink as they will. Wink most when widows wince  
(SP, 77-8)

The first line, an aphoristic statement, establishes the equivalent of Webster's first definition of a fiction, that is, an "act of fashioning, imitating, or inventing; hence a device, contrivance."<sup>5</sup> Thus poetry is accepted as the highest form of fashioning one's life-world and constructing a literature of truth. But the last two lines reveal that fictive things "wink as they will" and thus may lend a degree of doubt concerning the veracity of the first line. The latter lines, because of the duplicity implied by the wink, appear to coincide with Webster's second definition of a fiction: a "dissembling; counterfeiting; pretending; deceit."<sup>6</sup> Taken together, as they must be, more encompassing definition of a supreme fiction emerges, one which includes both the construction and deconstruction of its essential nature.

The wink in this passage appears a brilliant means to achieve the dissolution of structure given impetus by a fiction. It is the duplicity amidst the inventive fashioning of a fiction and seems inherent in the very denotation of the word. Moreover, the action implies the transient life and inevitable death of fictive things projected by man. It is the instantaneous crumbling of truth; all that we hold to be stable and sincere vanishes in one brief involuntary gesture. It is and it is not. It was and it was not. The wink is at once the duplicity and parody of a supreme fiction, the trickster in it which tears it down, thus beginning the rehearsal for the construction of a new supplanting fiction — itself residing on the long lash of a wink:

Slowly the ivy on the stones  
Becomes the stones. Women become

The cities, children become the fields  
And men in waves become the sea.

It is the chord that falsifies.  
The sea returns upon the men,

The fields entrap the children, brick  
Is a weed and all the flies are caught,

Wingless and withered, but living alive.  
The discord merely magnifies.

Deeper within the belly's dark  
Of time, time grows upon the rock.

(SP, 138)

If we can put the supreme fiction in a holding pattern before pursuing further its creative and de-creative properties, we will be able to take a look at its chief accomplice — metaphoric resemblance. Stevens once stated, "if we desire to formulate an accurate theory of poetry, we find it necessary to examine the structure of reality, because reality is the central reference for poetry" (NA, 71). A significant component of this structure of reality is the resemblance between things in the world, between a thing in this world and a thing in the imagination, and between things in the imagination. Resemblance "binds together" and relies upon metaphor, or the "creation of resemblance by the imagination," in order to accomplish this activity (NA, 72). Through metaphor, the imagination seizes and manipulates nature, but because it is constructing a fiction, its limitation becomes apparent: it cannot create a new nature; it can only alter the existent one, transforming it from the real to the unreal through its structural features of perceived resemblance. It is also by means of metaphoric resemblance that the imagination and reality are united on that "exquisite plane" of poetry or supreme fictions:

...it is not too extravagant to think of resemblances and of the repetitions of resemblances as a source of the ideal. In short, metaphor has its aspect of the ideal. This aspect of it cannot be dismissed merely because we think that we have long since outlived the ideal. The truth is that we are constantly outliving it and yet the ideal itself remains alive with an enormous life.

(NA, 81-2)

It is largely because of the metaphoric value of the imagination that we are able to brush against the unique and isolated objects of reality. Donald Sheehan has noted that "for Stevens, ...metaphor is both the prelude to knowledge and the evasion of reality."<sup>7</sup> It arranges "'things as they are'... into meaningful relationships." Sheehan proceeds to expand on Stevens' view of reality:

The basis of it is that material reality, 'things as they are,' cannot be known by a fixed view; one must continually shift one's perspective simply because 'things as they are' are themselves in flux: things live and die, the seasons change, civilizations rise and fall. Yet what interests Stevens are not the unknowable mutations (Eliot's and Pound's ancient and modern worlds) but, simply, the immediate world of reality.... In this view dualism concerning reality is *functional*, not destructive: sometimes one sees reality as metaphor; at other times one sees it as unknowable thing. One moves between these extremes.<sup>8</sup>

Metaphor, too, because it composes the supreme fiction, both constructs and de-constructs the relationship between imagination and reality. It provides the movement between the two poles, yet evades its fictive description of reality as soon as it is accepted as a factual account of the landscape. Neither the metaphoric relationship, taken by itself, nor those unique and isolated objects of reality ultimately define the world; instead, what does define it is the perpetual oscillation between them, cleansed in constructive/de-constructive cycle.

The primary value of metaphor and hence, supreme fictions, is that they respond to the flux inherent in the world. They are sensitive to the notion of time, and they fulfill the motivation for writing, as well as being, which is renewal. To fix the imagination is the death of imagination, and the death of imagination is the extinction of supreme fictions. We would then be left in a world of disillusionment, a tepid grey everydayness. "Eventually," Stevens writes, "an imaginary world is entirely without interest.... To be at the end of fact is not to be at the beginning of imagination but it is to be at the end of both" (OP, 175).

The houses are haunted  
By white night-gowns.  
None are green,  
Or purple with green rings,  
Or green with yellow rings,  
Or yellow with blue rings.  
None of them are strange,  
With socks of lace  
And beaded ceintures.  
People are not going  
To dream of baboons and periwinkles.  
Only, here and there, an old sailor,  
Drunk and asleep in his boots,  
Catches tigers  
In red weather

(SP, 11)

A supreme fiction emerges as a revelation for its author, but after a while, things being as they are, it begins to exude an oppressive boredom. The world constantly defies fixity, out-distancing the words which have become worn and obsolete in their repetitions. So the necessity for the recurrent wink. There is an element of genuine fear underlying fictive things and it is this fear which lends to metaphor its evasive quality:

And I have known the eyes already, known them all –  
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,  
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,  
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,  
Then how should I begin  
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?  
And how should I presume?<sup>9</sup>

Stevens takes heed of the plight of Prufrock, who has measured out his life with slightly tarnished coffee spoons, preferring to it a cycle of fictive things which turn like the seasons. Rooted in the perpetual change, the fiction avoids stagnation and opts instead for natural death which makes birth and renewal a possibility once again. "The bough of summer and the winter branch. / These are the measures destined for her soul" (SP, 5). Summer sees fictive things in their glory, embellished. The bare rock has bloomed into a thing of beauty, complexity, and color. Autumn is a prelude to finality. By winter the stripping away has been completed and we return to an unadorned plain sense of things as if it were the first time we really noticed the bald contour of the rock, formidably desolate:

The principle Romantic vision of mutability stems from Spenser, who lamented natural change and yet found in the cycle of the months an augury of salvation, an eternal principle surviving amid the particles of decay.... [Stevens] shares the more positive Spenserianism of Wordsworth and Keats, an attitude that recognizes the tragedy of mutable existence, but insists also on the necessity of celebrating the values of organic repetition.<sup>10</sup>

When fictions fail to assert themselves as possibilities they become impurities and must be purged. Stevens proposes that if they are not, the "exquisite plane" will metamorphose into a dump piled high with the images of the past. The dump is the unholy ground for absolutist fictions that have developed into lifeless human pollutants. "The dump is full / Of images. Days pass like papers from a press" (SP, 163). One visits it daily and feels the ennui of the well-embedded printed word, the disaffected anger which shouts across the tabloid — Tragedy — and the familiar story read a thousand times from a thousand different permutations of those same words, apposite material for a generic novel. When this defilement occurs, the need for purification becomes evident. "One rejects / The trash."

That's the moment when the moon creeps up  
To the bubbling of bassoons. That's the time  
One looks at the elephant-colorings of tires.  
Everything is shed; and the moon comes up as the moon  
(All its images are in the dump) and you see  
As a man (not like an image of a man),  
You see the moon rise in the empty sky  
(SP, 163-4).

One sees the moon as the moon, as one confronts the barren rock in the dead of winter. It is as it is, nothing more, nothing less. The resurrection and ascension of the thing from the feeble anchoring images in the dump can be attributed to the purification ritual which it has undergone. Through the de-construction of a fictive thing we are able to turn our backs on the dump and walk away through a wide clearing, the images peeling away like snake skins the further we go in our own direction. Once we are free from the impurities we

can look anew at our nearest celestial neighbor now placed in an ignorant space. It has survived and remains illimitable, once more challenging the purified creative imagination to dare to take another stab. Fictions are possibilities.

The construction/de-construction cycle of a supreme fiction assures its ability to rise above the tyranny of images and, therefore, effectively jolts one out of the rigidified "automatism of language."<sup>11</sup> A fiction is perhaps the closest approximation to our awareness of an estranged nature, but it is a supreme fiction which is self-conscious of its own linguisticity, and given to periodic purification rites. The absolute belief in a fiction must be shaken by a corresponding disbelief, which not only clears our vision, but maintains our freedom and power to command language:

You must become an ignorant man again  
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye  
And see it clearly in the idea of it....

How clean the sun when seen in its idea,  
Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven  
That has expelled us and our images...

The death of one god is the death of all.  
Let purple Phoebus lie in umber harvest,  
Let Phoebus slumber and die in autumn umber,

Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was  
A name for something that never could be named.  
There was a project for the sun and is.

(SP, 207-8)

Purification becomes a requirement in Stevens' system of renewed appellation. Yet the task of the ephebe is quite at odds with the project of the sun, manifesting the relationship between a conceiving imaginative consciousness and a slippery realm of non-symbolic motion which calls it forth, only to eventually deflect it from its hard neutrality. Coming to the end of one supreme fiction, however, permits the ephebe to live within that emptiness which leads to the beginning of desire. So just as doom sets in by its very creation, a new conception arises, like a phoenix, out of the ashes. In the end we drop our useful architectonic designs and return like fallen scholars to the sparseness of winter. We return to the elements: a season, a rock, the earth, the sky, the sun and moon in their natural simplicity. The world, a magnificent house of face-cards, collapses. Beyond the tyranny of language, we have again outlived an ideal. The extreme edges of that "exquisite plane" have folded in upon themselves, bringing on the dissolution of a supreme fiction:

After the leaves have fallen, we return  
To a plain sense of things. It is as if  
We had come to an end of the imagination,  
Inanimate in an inert savoir.

It is difficult even to choose the adjective  
For this blank cold, this sadness without cause.  
The great structure has become a minor house.  
No turban walks across the lessened floors.

The greenhouse never so badly needed paint.  
The chimney is fifty years old and slants to one side.  
A fantastic effort has failed, a repetition  
In a repetitiousness of men and flies.

Yet the absence of the imagination had  
Itself to be imagined. The great pond,  
The plain sense of it, without reflection, leaves,  
Mud, water like dirty glass, expressing silence

Of a sort, silence of a rat come out to see,  
The great pond and its waste of the lillies, all this  
Had to be imagined as an inevitable knowledge,  
Required, as a necessity requires.

(SP, 382-3)

The failure of a fictive thing, though evoking despair over the insignificance and futility of human effort, is at the same time the necessity of poetic existence. Its value lies precisely in death, a requisite for freedom, which Stevens likens to "a man who kills himself / Each night, an incessant butcher, whose knife / Grows sharp in blood."<sup>12</sup> Freedom enables the imagination to regularly purge itself of its past so as to creatively apprehend the immediate presence of reality. Another supreme fiction is always in gestation affirming its own value as a source of truth and guiding conception of reality. The role of the poet is to create generously these fictions and thus extend freedom to his face. Through the poem, an awakening is possible and, so, the sharing of pleasure in a fictive thing. Or, to borrow from Kenneth Burke, what the poet is doing in creating supreme fictions is offering both conceptual and practical equipment for living. Stevens has noted the invaluable contribution of the poet in relation to his world:

There is, in fact, a world of poetry indistinguishable from the world in which we live, or, I ought to say, no doubt, from the world in which we shall come to live, since what makes the poet the potent figure that he is, or was, or ought to be, is that he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it.

(NA, 31)

Wallace Stevens lived to the honorable age of seventy-six, not only outliving his naturalist heritage by many years, but out-thinking them as well. He enjoyed a full healthy life in which he trafficked in fictions, poetically illustrating his philosophical ideas. In his dual role as poet-critic, Stevens established

an oeuvre which catapulted American literature into the postmodern era long before that epithet was ever concocted. He was indeed a potent figure as a poet according to his own definition, leaving behind a contemporary vision of the world extending "beyond the planets." It may not be too farfetched at all, therefore, to make the admission that the poet now lives in the world of Stevens and not in the world of Darwin.

#### NOTES

1. All quotations cited by the following abbreviations are by Wallace Stevens:  
NA Wallace Stevens. *The Necessary Angel*. New York: Knopf, 1951.  
OP Wallace Stevens. *Opus Posthumous*. New York: Knopf, 1957.  
L Holly Stevens, ed. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*. New York: Knopf, 1966.  
SP Holly Stevens, ed. *The Palm At The End Of The Mind: Selected Poems and a Play by Wallace Stevens*. New York: Vintage, 1971.
2. Quoted in Hazard Adams, *Critical Theory Since Plato* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1971).
3. Kenneth Burke; As presented in his ILA Colloquium, Emory University, Winter Quarter of 1982.
4. Frank Lentricchia, *The Gaiety of Language: An Essay on the Radical Poetics of W.B. Yeats and Wallace Stevens* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 12.  
Related to this issue of subject/object duality, J. Hillis Miller, in an article, proposes that Stevens progressed from a Cartesian dualism in his early career to a point in his later work whereby he moved into a single realm in which he eliminated the process of transforming reality into an image. This essay argues the opposite, i.e., for the endurability of the concept of supreme fictions which would necessarily maintain that Stevens' work was predicated on the assumption of a Cartesian dualism throughout his long career, thus insisting on the separateness yet interdependent existence of both reality and imagination.
- See J. Hillis Miller, "Wallace Stevens' Poetry of Being," in *The Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, eds. Roy Harvey Pearce and J. Hillis Miller (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1965), pp. 143-162.
5. William Allan Neilson (Ed. in Chief), *Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language*, 2nd ed. unabridged (Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1961).
6. *Ibid.*
7. Donald Sheehan, "Stevens' Theory of Metaphor," in *Critics on Wallace Stevens*, Peter L. McNamara, ed. (Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1972), p. 39.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
9. See T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," in *The Waste Land And Other Poems* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jonanovich, Inc., 1962), p. 5.
10. Harold Bloom, "Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction: A Commentary," in *Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Marie Borroff, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), p. 83-4.
11. See Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (New York: The Orion Press, 1964), p. xxxi of the Introduction.
12. Miller, op. cit. p. 150.

## Wallace Stevens And The Haunts Of Unimportant Ghosts

THOMAS F. LOMBARDI

**A**mityville, Pennsylvania, a scant three miles from the Daniel Boone Homestead, fifteen miles southeast of Reading, is a little vilage tucked away in the state's piedmont. It may not appear on every road map, but the place exists. Amityville, an out-of-the-way community that has until recently escaped the hubbub of the twentieth century, sits in the middle of lush Pennsylvania farm country. Even in Amityville, however, signs of change are evident: new housing developments altering the once exclusively rural nature of the neighborhood. Nevertheless, the area is still lovely, though the idyllic milieu is appreciated only by one in search of rustification and solitude. Most people would ordinarily choose not to visity Amityville. Only a traveler, lost on the back roads, would pause for refreshments at the Amity House, the local eating establishment. The long and short of it is, people either live in Amityville, or they pass through it. Few people take the time to stop – especially VIPs.

One VIP did visit Amityville in 1945. He was Wallace Stevens, whose star had begun to ruse in the literary world. In Amityville, no one, with exception of the village minister, knew him or heard of him, for that matter. He was a stranger wandering about the secluded Pennsylvania vilage. Stevens had traveled to Amityville for a specific purpose, found what he had gone there to investigate, and then departed. Still it is likely that even today most citizens of Amityville have never heard of Wallace Stevens, the Pennsylvanian who has come to be widely recognized as perhaps America's greatest poet. Yet Stevens, a native of Reading, often returned home to visit family and friends, and his visit to Amityville was one of several visits he made to southeastern Pennsylvania over the years in an attempt to discover the "haunts of unimportant ghosts."<sup>1</sup> Unimportant ghosts? Hardly. So important were those "unimportant ghosts" – his ancestors – that Stevens, hoping to acquire information about the paternal and maternal sides of the family, initiated correspondence with several pastors in numerous counties of southeastern Pennsylvania. His correspondence with those pastors began long before his visit to Amityville, however.

Several miles to the east of Amityville in Bucks County, Stevens sought for his paternal Holland Dutch ancestry, although the paternal line did have a history in Philadelphia and even Chester Counties. In 1945 distant relatives still lived in Bucks County. In fact, one relative, Horace Hogeland, at the age of eighty-four, was president of the Newtown Bank. Since the ancestral roots were deep in Bucks County, Stevens was naturally interested in information that shed light on his origins there, and he sought for those origins in graveyards throughout the lower and central areas of the county. In Central Bucks, Stevens looked for ancestors in the Newtown Cemetery. In Lower Bucks, he looked for ancestors in "the ancient burying ground at Feasterville"<sup>2</sup> and dis-

covered in Feasterville the graves of Benjamin and Elizabeth Barcalow Stevens, his grandparents, Abraham and Maria Hogeland Stevens, his great-grandparents. He also located in the Feasterville yard the grave of John Barcalow, son of Abraham, brother of Garrett, who was Stevens' paternal grandmother's father. Mrs. Frederick Enders and Mrs. Lila James Rony, genealogists who were employed by Stevens for several years, went to Churchville, a short distance from Feasterville, and copied inscriptions from tombstones in the cemetery of the Churchville Reformed Church, a cemetery Mrs. Rony described as "wonderful."<sup>3</sup> Correspondence alone, however, failed to satisfy Stevens: he wanted visual evidence and inquired about the possibility of locating a New Hope artist who might agree to take photographs of the Churchville and Feasterville cemeteries.

It is probable that the cemetery attached to the Churchville Reformed Church, a church to which most early Dutch settlers had once belonged, inspired "Dutch Graves in Bucks County." And though Stevens failed to write a companion piece entitled "Dutch Graves in Berks County," he probably considered the idea in the way he once considered writing a poem entitled "Hymn to Old John Zeller," a virtual companion to "The Bed of Old John Zeller." After all, he did recount browsing through an old Dutch yard not in Bucks but somewhere above Morgantown, Berks County, where he chanced one day upon "a cemetery full of soldiers and Dutchmen born long ago," subjects—soldiers and Dutchmen—emphasized in "Dutch Gravs in Bucks County." The image of Stevens nosying around those illegible and oftentimes faceless tombstones is intriguing, an activity about which he once somewhat cryptically wrote "one can imagine."<sup>4</sup>

In Bucks County, meanwhile, Mrs. Enders turned up genealogical material that had historical implications: e.g., Garrett Barcalow, Stevens' great-grandfather, whose life extended from the end of the American Revolution to the Civil War, i.e., 1780-1861, who conceivably remembered George Washington and surely Abraham Lincoln, was buried at Churchville with Eleanor Hogeland, along with their daughter, Elizabeth. His interest in Garrett Barcalow led him to the discovery that the name Barcalow either had variations in spelling or was quite set apart from Barkalow: Buckalow, Buckalew, and even Van Barcalow. Actually, the variations in orthography frequently sent Stevens on a wild goose chase — most of the times in the personages of his contracted genealogists — right up through central and northcentral Pennsylvania. Over a period of several years, he examined or had examined no fewer than six graveyards and their churches along the upper Susquehanna River.

Though Stevens was lured to search the more remote regions of central Pennsylvania, Enders seems to have remained in Bucks County, where she even discovered the existence of Garrett's parents: John Buckalew and Kitty Conover. But confusion seems to have arisen over Kitty's final resting place. Enders, for instance, was of the opinion that Kitty's grave was located in Wrightstown Friends Cemetery, which was, according to the genealogist, "the only cemetery folks know about in Wrightstown."<sup>5</sup> By February 1946, Stevens

seemed convinced that Kitty was buried elsewhere; but in October 1947, Stevens confessed to genealogist Mr. W.R. Conover that he had been unsuccessful in the search to find Kitty. At one point, he even considered that possibly a confusion in names had occurred, and so he looked for a Wright Burial Ground in Davisville (which Stevens thought might have been named after Kitty's second husband, whose surname was Davis), Southampton Township, Lower Bucks. In 1949 Walter N. Downs, another genealogist, informed Stevens of the presence of a Methodist Cemetery in Wrightstown (it was also conjectured that the yard might be in places called Wrightsville or Davistown), an examination of which at that time failed to reveal any tombstones bearing the names Buckalew, Davis, Conover, or anything resembling them. After a long and expensive search by Stevens, we are told that Kitty's grave was either located in the Methodist Cemetery at Wrightstown or the Methodist yard at Davisville. I have found no evidence to support the existence of a Methodist yard in the former.

In a manner of speaking, the interest generated by Kitty was occasioned by the lore that had grown up around her. It was learned that Kitty, intensely patriotic, had driven her father's cows into a swamp rather than allow the British to capture them. So it was that in the midst of usually serious and at times monotonous work one of his genealogists would forward interesting and even amusing information back to Stevens, which was the case when Mrs. Roney reported the presence of the following incredible inscription on the tombstone of a long lost relative: "Here rests Elisa Van Sant / Food for worms."<sup>6</sup> Incidentally, Van Sant is an important name historically in Bucks County (a covered bridge, an historical landmark, stands in Solebury Township dedicated to the memory of the Van Sant family) and was in itself sufficient justification for acknowledging the bizarre epitaph.

That Stevens successfully traced his ancestors back to the Revolution and even more distantly to William Penn gave him a sense of intimate association with the region. The storehouse of delightful characters and tales that the genealogical mining unearthed served to intensify Stevens' determination to uncover a meaningful past in Bucks County.

Stevens did not limit his genealogical investigations to Bucks County, but probed the genealogical archives of the other southeastern Pennsylvania counties. In doing so, for example, he traced Garrett's brother's grave, Abraham Buckalew, to Chester County, west of Philadelphia. In fact, on December 23, 1946, Stevens travelled to Oxford, near Chadds Ford, and visited the Elk Ridge Cemetery, a small abandoned Methodist graveyard, where he located the headstones of Abraham and his family. On the heels of that visit, Stevens communicated a topic to Mrs. Enders that had become increasingly sensitive to him: whether or not his ancestors — in this case Abraham — were indeed Holland Dutch: "On his stone his name is spelled Abraham Buckalew. He has numerous descendants, none of whom ever for a moment proposed that he was Dutch. They had always proposed that he was Scotch."<sup>7</sup> That Scotch strain, along with a possible English Quaker thread, was not, interestingly enough, a source of pride for Stevens. He was Holland Dutch, or he was Pennsylvania Dutch, or he was nothing.

Several other old cemeteries in southeastern Pennsylvania intrigued Stevens: in Lebanon, Lancaster, and his own Berks County. The Zeller clan, a part of the maternal and Pennsylvania Dutch side of the family, are buried in cemeteries throughout southeastern Pennsylvania, and Charles R. Barker and other genealogists combed many of those cemeteries in the expectation of finding Zellers. In Lebanon County: a tombstone inscription at Klopp's church, Hamlin; another tombstone inscription at Kauffman's Cemetery, north of Annville; in the Lutheran Cemetery, Schaefferstown; St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Brickersville. In Berks County: old inscriptions in the yard at Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church Cemetery; the yard of the Trinity Tulpehocken Reformed Church, east of Myerstown; the yard of the St. John's Lutheran Church of Host; and one graveyard attached to Spies Church on the edge of the Oley Valley.<sup>8</sup> Stevens was also curious about two graveyards at Stouchsburg: one yard attached to the Trinity Lutheran Church and the other the Reformed Lutheran, where Stevens believed his Zeller ancestors were interred. Stevens alludes to his visit to Christ Church near Stouchsburg in his essay "About One of Marianne Moore's Poems" In that essay he also mentions the Trinity Tulpehocken Church, where he visited, along with two local Lutherans, the old graveyard. His description of the yard is memorable:

This [the yard] was an enclosure of about an acre, possibly a little more. The wall was of limestone about four feet high, weatherbeaten, baren, bald. In the graveyard were possibly eight or ten sheep, the color of the wall and of many of the gravestones and even of the sunlight. The droppings of the sheep fertilized the soil. There were a few cedars here and there but these only accentuated the sense of abandonment and destitution, the sense that, after all, the vast mausoleum of human memory is emptier than one had supposed.<sup>9</sup>

Still another churchyard in the Tulpehocken, which was called Rieth's Church or, more formally, Zion Tulpehocken Lutheran Church. By 1944, the church was no longer standing, though its graveyard still existed; and Zellers, Stevens had reason to believe, were buried in it. Stevens sent genealogist Lottie Bausman there to record the Zeller inscriptions. In the same year, he was also corresponding with a local pastor, the Reverend Paul F. Haas, of Stoney Creek Mills, Berks County, inquiring about the possible presence of additional Zeller graves in Spies Church Cemetery. However, no graves were ever found there.

Zeller graves were discovered in Amityville, Berks County. Stevens was most interested in St. Paul's Church there, principally because interred in the graveyard adjacent to the church are two of those "unimportant ghosts:" John and Catherine Zeller, his great-grandparents, both deceased since the mid-nineteenth century. Stevens, therefore, began to exchange letters with a Lutheran minister, the Reverend Howard A. Althouse of Boyertown, who served in the capacity as pastor of three parishes in Berks and Montgomery Counties: the Falkner-Swamp Evangelical and Reformed Church across the Berks line in New Hanover, Montgomery County; Trinity Church,

Bechtelsville; and, of course, St. Paul's, Amityville. It was Althouse who initially located the graves of John and Catherine, which he acknowledged in a letter to Stevens on September 12, 1944:

It [the cemetery] is surrounded by a stone wall. On two of these walls is a slanting board-roofing-painted red. Quite close to the Northern wall – covered with a board roof-alongside of a scarred by lightning, century old, cedar tree – almost covered with green honeysuckle vine we found the grave of Catherine Zellers. (I found it). It was the last tombstone we looked at in this cemetery. This is the inscription we found on it in English (most of the inscriptions are in German). Many or most of the old brown stones bear *no inscriptions* so badly are they weather-worn.

And then he adds:

We looked back of her tombstone only to find another more slate-covered-tombstone-lying-flat – almost covered with moss and vines. I started cleaning the vines and moss, and soil from the stone until I found the following inscription: In memory of / John Zeller / Who departed this life / December 20, 1858 / In the 79th year of his life. If you should desire to see those graves, and come to my home, I will cheerfully accompany you to the cemetery, for the graves are easy to find near that lone, lightning-scarred, old weather-beaten cedar tree – near the stone wall.

A friendly and informative letter which encouraged Stevens.

Stevens traveled from Reading to Amityville on January 23, 1945. It was during that time that Stevens was corresponding with John Zimmerman Harner, a local citizen who was accumulating funds for the restoration of the Amityville yard. In fact, Harner as a boy remembered John Zeller's sons, William and Amos, who are also buried in the yard. Harner was also familiar with the presence of Zeller families in the Boyertown-Limerick neighborhoods, and from Harner, Stevens collected considerable information about the Zellers. He wanted to know about the people with whom John and Catherine had lived and something of the life of their time. In correspondence with genealogist Catherine Lee, Stevens was told that John and Catherine had spent a period of time in Germantown (Philadelphia County), thereafter in the Oley Valley, before settling down in Amity Township, where John seems to have owned twenty acres of land. Upon visiting Myerstown in 1947, Stevens even succeeded in locating a number of families there who knew something about them and who verified their identity.

I first learned of Amityville some years ago while reading a letter written by Stevens to Harner. In that letter, Stevens' observation of the Amityville yard is poignant:

When I first saw it – I mean the yard – it looked forlorn, a place full of forgotten and abandoned people where lives were almost without the slightest memorials. In particular, the two Zeller graves in which I was

interested, off to one side, more or less alone, seemed isolated, as if they were the graves of strangers. All the graves in the yard were like objects that had ceased to be part of time.<sup>10</sup>

Two or perhaps three poems had their origins in that Amityville graveyard. The setting of "Burghers of Petty Death" is obviously Amityville:

These two by the stone wall  
Are a slight part of death  
The grass is still green.

But there is a total death,  
A devastation, a death of great height  
And depth, covering all surfaces,  
Filling the mind

These are the small townsmen of death,  
A man and a woman, like two leaves  
That keep clinging to a tree,  
Before winter freezes and grows black —

Of course, the "two by the stone wall" are John and Catherine Zeller. Perhaps the "wasted figure" is Stevens. Why "wasted"? Stevens was sixty-five when he made that visit, and the experience did have a despondent side. He was growing old. He felt a stranger among relatives in Reading. Friends and family were dying or dead. The visit seems to have crystallized the notion that his life and his world were rapidly sliding toward an end.

At the time of my visit a few years ago, I saw what Stevens had seen: throughout the graveyard several headstones stood without inscriptions, worn away by weather and time, other stones tilted, still others in a state of total collapse. They seemed indeed the markers "of forgotten and abandoned people." Even though Stevens apparently had had the Zeller stones uprighted, I experienced some difficulty locating the gravesites for two reasons: (1) the stone wall described by Stevens in the Harner letter was no longer standing, (2) Catherine's stone was partially concealed and John's stone totally camouflaged by the low-hanging branches of a honey-suckle bush, perhaps the same bush Althouse had described. The honeysuckle clug to and rambled about a large cedar, undoubtedly the tree mentioned by the pastor, and it occurred to me that Stevens had that tree in mind when he wrote in "Burghers of Petty Death" that John and Catherine were "A man and a woman, like two leaves" that "keep clinging to a tree." In short, I was astonished to discover that the headstones of those two Amityville burghers did, almost literally, "cling" to that cedar tree, John's stone flush against the large tree, Catherine's beside John's. Over the years that old tree had grown considerably larger and had inched close to John's headstone. In a sense, the poem prefigured the reality.

As I wandered about the graveyard, I began to suspect that the yard had inspired other poems, such as "Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion," whose

Ludwig might have had his source in a Ludwig interred only a few gravesites from the Zellers. What is unmistakable is the source of the inspiration for "The Good Man Has No Shape": a poem in which Stevens eulogizes old John Zeller. The poem is clearly a repudiation of the epitaph that graces John Zeller's headstone: "I am the resurrection and the life, / He that believeth in me, / Though he were dead, / Yet shall live" (John 11: 24-25). That Stevens read the epitaph — which was probably the funeral text, as was the practice<sup>12</sup> — at the time of the visit is certain from the fact that "The Good Man" deals, paradoxically, with the theme of the unresurrected body. Even stronger evidence accrues in the light of Stevens' request to Althouse, asking that any inscription chiseled on the Zeller headstones be copied and forward to him. Of course, Stevens' interest in inscriptions did not begin nor did it end in Amityville.

Stevens learned that Zeller inscriptions existed in cemeteries in Lehigh and Philadelphia Counties. One Zeller, a clergyman, the Reverend Daniel Zeller, and his wife, Mary, are buried in the Union Cemetery, Allentown, and Zellers are also buried in the Rosehill Cemetery, Berks County, and even in the Laurel Hill Cemetery, along the Schuylkill River, in Philadelphia, which was the initial burial place of Elizabeth Stevens' sister, until her remains were later transferred to Reading.

When Stevens was seventy years old, he complained to Eleanor Stevens Sauer, his niece, that when he returned home the only person who exhibited any interest in him was the superintendent of the Charles Evens Cemetery. Stevens was familiar with the Reading cemetery because the family plot is located there. Garrett Barcalow Stevens (Wallace's father) Margaretha Catherine Zeller (his mother), John Bergen (his brother), Elizabeth and Mary Catherine (his sisters) are all buried in the plot. Only Garrett, his eldest brother, is buried elsewhere — in Cleveland. That Stevens was not buried in the family plot can be interpreted as a kind of final familial estrangement. He was buried in Hartford's Cedar Hill Cemetery, but the Reading connection is cited on his tombstone, the memory that he was born not in Connecticut but in Pennsylvania, information not ordinarily acknowledged on headstones.

After the deaths of his parents, Stevens occasionally returned to Reading to visit their gravesites, and those visits — more in the nature of a pilgrim visiting a shrine — made a lasting impression on him. In fact, in one letter to Elsie, he mentions such a visit to Charles Evans and declares that the "brief survey of the holy air left on my mind a most afflicting impression."<sup>13</sup> The "holy air" that left an "afflicting impression" disclosed Stevens' acute sensibility toward his deceased parents as early as 1919. During the 1940s, at which time he became increasingly conscious of them, he felt compelled to write to the Charles Evans Superintendent as to whether one of his "snappy young grave diggers" could "copy the inscriptions on the stone" of his parents. During a time of recollection, he was struck by the realization that he had forgotten the dates of their deaths.<sup>14</sup>

Imagine an American poet roaming about quiet Pennsylvania graveyards, searching, at tremendous time and expense, for the graves of his ancestors. The whole idea seems farfetched. Not so when the poet was Wallace Stevens. Graveyards held a fascination for Stevens insofar as the message of the past

was interred in them, and Stevens was concerned with that message. Stevens in those graveyards is the other side — the eclipsed side — of the man, and Stevens was a man whose life involved eclipse. One side bright, a poet heralding the glories of life. The other side dark, a man, his youth gone, his family dead, on the threshold of what he supposed the possible oblivion of the grave. Fear increasingly filled him with the thought of, as he said, “the occasionally frightening aspect of the past into which so many that we have known have disappeared almost as if they had never been real.”<sup>15</sup> But he was equally courageous: he braved death, refusing to shrink from it. His return to Oxford, Stouchburg, Philadelphia, Feasterville, and assuredly, Amityville were only a handful of the many places, as he once declared, in his “own part of the world”<sup>16</sup> about which he was intensely curious. There is some degree of validity to the notion that his return to those Pennsylvania graveyards was a memorial that gave those “unimportant ghosts” buried in them an importance they would otherwise have never enjoyed.

#### NOTES

1. Stevens to Henry Church, July 19, 1945. Holly Stevens, ed., *Letters of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 507. When information in the article is taken from the *Letters*, hereafter it will be cited *LWS*. However, most of the material is taken from the Wallace Stevens MSS on file in the Huntington Library, San Marino, California, and is published with the permission of the Library. Genealogical material is taken from journals, letters, and other documents. Much of the genealogical material is taken from MSS (MH: Boxes 72-79) entitled: *History of Zeller-Stevens; History of the Franks*; and “Genealogical Material: Buckalew Barcalow Families.” Unquoted background information and facts are taken from the following HL MSS:

- Stevens to Mary Owen Steinmetz, Aug. 10, 1944.
  - Stevens to John Z. Harner, Jan 23, 1945; Nov. 13, 1947; Jan 30, 1945.
  - Emma Jobbins to Stevens, July 11, 1948.
  - Elizabeth Case to Stevens, Dec. 1946.
  - Lila James Roney to Stevens, Sept. 28, 1943.
  - Stevens to Mrs. Frederick Enders, Nov. 20, 1945; Sept. 30, 1946; Feb. 11, 1946.
  - Stevens to Mrs. Harry Scidmore FitzRandolph, June 15, 1953.
  - Stevens to W. R. Conover, Oct. 24, 1947.
  - Stevens to Howard A. Althouse, June 26, 1945.
  - Stevens to David Bane, ca. 1943.
  - Stevens to Paul F. Haas, June 7, 1944.
  - Stevens to Catherine Lee, Oct 11, 1946; Feb. 19, 1945.
  - Stevens to Lottie Bausman, Dec. 13, 1944.
  - Walter N. Downs to Stevens, 1949.
2. Stevens to Charles R. Barker, Feb. 1, 1945.
  3. Roney to Stevens, 1943.
  4. Journal, July 25/31, 1907.
  5. Mrs. Enders to Stevens, Dec. 12, 1945.
  6. Roney to Stevens, Dec. 2, 1942.
  7. Stevens to Mrs. Enders, Sept. 30, 1946.
  8. Genealogical material taken from *History of the Franks*.
  9. *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Random House, 1942), p. 101.
  10. Stevens to Harner, June 15, 1953. *LWS*, p. 782.
  11. *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), p. 362.
  12. Althouse to Stevens, Sept. 21, 1944.
  13. Stevens to Elsie Moll, July 24, 1919.
  14. Stevens to Peter Scholl, Aug. 19, 1942.
  15. Stevens to Barbara Church, April 27, 1950. *LWS*. p. 678.
  16. Stevens to Harner, June 15, 1953. *LWS*. p. 782.

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ANNOUNCEMENT

Wallace Stevens Society

1983 MLA Program

December 29, 1983

3-5 pm (tentative)

Chair: Marjorie Perloff,

Florence R. Scott Professor of English at University of Southern California

TOPIC: WALLACE STEVENS AS OTHER: SOME NEW FRAMES

1. "The Adequacy of the visible and the beholder's excess"

Bonnie Costello, Associate Professor of English, Boston University, is the author of *MARIANNE MOORE, IMAGINARY POSSESSIONS* (Harvard U.P. 1981) and has written widely on modern poetry for *PARNASSUS*, *CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE*, etc. She is the recipient of an ACLS and Bunting Fellowship for 1983-4 and will be writing a book on Elizabeth Bishop.

2. Tentative title: "O'Hara, Ashbery, and Stevens"

James Breslin, Professor of English, University of California Berkeley, is the author of *WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS, AN AMERICAN ARTIST* (OUP, 1969), countless essays, and the forthcoming *THE END OF THE LINE: AMERICAN POETRY SINCE WORLD WAR II* to be published in the fall by U of Chicago Press.

3. "Stevens without Epistemology"

Gerald Burns, Professor of English, U of Iowa is author of *MODERN POETRY AND THE IDEA OF LANGUAGE* (Yale U P), *INVENTIONS: WRITING, TEXTUALITY AND UNDERSTANDING IN LITERARY HISTORY* (Yale U P, 1982), many theoretical essays in *NEW LITERARY HISTORY*, *CRITICAL INQUIRY*, etc.

4. subject – "Modernism as understood via Stevens, Pound, Williams etc."

Albert Gelpi, Coe Professor of American Literature, Stanford U, is author of: *EMILY DICKENSON: THE MIND OF THE POET* (1965); *THE TENTH MUSE: THE PSYCHE OF THE AMERICAN POET* (Harvard U P, 1975); co-ed, *ADRIENNE RICH'S POETRY* (W.W. Norton); many essays – now finishing book on postmodernism and the American tradition.

5. Topic: "Resonant Elegance of Precision": Objectivists on Stevens

Alan Golding, Assistant Professor, Writing Programs, UCLA is a recent PhD from U of Chicago. He has published essays on Ed Dorn, Zukofsky, Oppen, the literary canon (for *CRITICAL INQUIRY*).

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