

The Wallace Stevens Journal



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SPECIAL ISSUE: Stevens and Postmodern Criticism

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The Wallace Stevens Journal

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Wallace Stevens

A Celebration

Edited by

**Frank Doggett and
Robert Buttel**

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

—*The Wallace Stevens Journal*

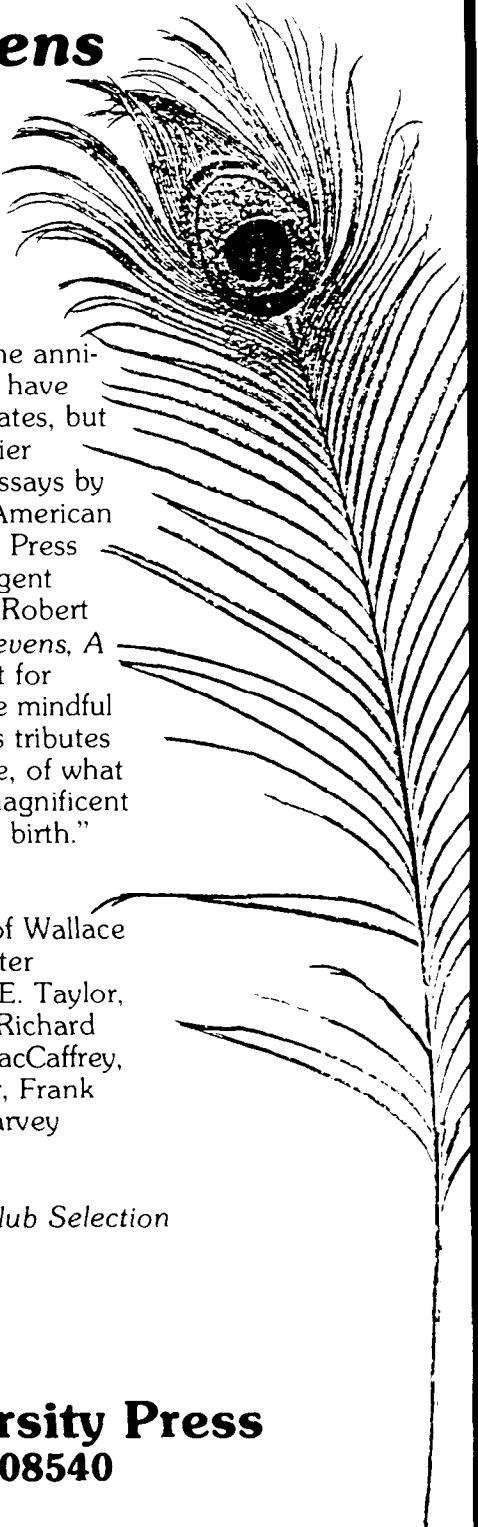
Contributors to this celebration of Wallace Stevens include: Louis Martz, Peter Brazeau, A. Walton Litz, Wilson E. Taylor, Holly Stevens, George Lensing, Richard Ellmann, Helen Vendler, Isabel MacCaffrey, Irvin Ehrenpreis, John Hollander, Frank Kermode, J. Hillis Miller, Roy Harvey Pearce, and Joseph N. Riddel.

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The Climate of Our Poems

JOSEPH N. RIDDEL

It is never the thing but the version of the thing

.....
The day in its color not perpending time,
Time in its weather, our most sovereign lord,
The weather in words and words in sounds of sound.

(“The Pure Good of Theory”)

Progress in any aspect is a movement through changes in
terminology.

(“Adagia”)

Weather is a sense of nature. Poetry is a sense.

(“Adagia”)

There seems to be an increasing anxiety of late that the “poems of our climate” have been used and abused by a conspiracy of mis-readers more intent on producing a “climate” of criticism than in honoring the poetic “thing itself.” After all, wasn’t it Harold Bloom who wrote *The Poems of Our Climate* —the book of criticism that re-writes, as it were, the poem, itself a re-writing of Emerson—Bloom who in one elaborate gesture canonized Stevens as the primary voice in that garden of dissent we call the “new rhetoric.” I still hear some complaints that our poems just don’t mean what they used to—that criticism has dishonored their privilege by turning them into its own metaphysical grist. It is a common lament, and it occurs every time the critical scene changes. There is always the plea to get back to the poem itself, and to a criticism which in its echo of the poem will efface itself in order to let “The the” stand forth. The “climate” of criticism has always been wintry—recall even Heidegger’s metaphors, in his remarks on a Holderlin poem, that commentary should be like the fall of snowflakes upon a bell, a self-effacing utterance that allows the poem finally to speak its own silences. Criticism should be language unlanguaging itself in the scene of poetic revelation, that spring-time of a primordial language-ing.

Perhaps more than any other modernist American poet, Stevens has been a “central man” in the history of a critical clamor, including Heidegger and Heideggerianism, that not only refuses silence but which threatens to appropriate to criticism itself the privileged status of the poetic. If Stevens never seemed to belong in the “enclosed garden” of the New Criticism, however, many will hasten to remark that he does not deserve to be identified with the nihilistic blight of the yet newer criticism, that discouraging word with which some of us here in the West are even associated: “Deconstruction.” Now I’ve said or, at least, written it. Why is Stevens today af-

filiated with the avantest garde-in, with a nihilism or “mortal no” that he explicitly renounced in a “passion for yes”? Bloom, indeed, not only asked the question but insisted that the “poems of our climate” were an answer to it, that Stevens was the eternally American answer to European negative theology, and hence to “deconstruction.” And Bloom’s project, however much rumor has associated him with the moroseness of evenings in New Haven, has been to reject the very thing this symposium of essays is apparently organized to do: to read Stevens deconstructively, to appropriate Stevens to the latest graft (all puns intended) of criticism. “Shall I uncrumple,” to quote a passage some of you will recognize, “this much crumpled thing?” At least I will try to be the avuncular critic.

I wish it were a question of saying that Stevens, or any other modern poet for that matter, was the appropriate poet for a certain kind of criticism; for it would argue not only that poets produce or motivate the criticism adequate to their innovations (and thus that such notions as literary periods, like Romanticism, were historically rooted in poems or were scientific categories), but that certain kinds of poetry were more amenable to certain kinds of criticism: for example, that existentialism is the critical philosophy of the post-WW II novel, or, more precisely for our purposes, that phenomenology, as Hillis Miller and others used it in the sixties, is or is not more appropriate to Stevens’ poetry than is the New Criticism, or neo-Romantic epistemology, or, above all, deconstruction. I would like to take up the larger theoretical issue of this confused argument that holds, on the one hand, that external methodologies (drawn from various philosophies or ideologies, say, Freud, Marx, or Heidegger) are not appropriate to the privileged self-referential language of poetry, and, on the other, that certain kinds of criticism (say, Romantic epistemology, or neo-Aristotelian formalism, contextualism or structuralism) are more useful than others for approaching different kinds of styles: for example, that a criticism of consciousness can help us with Stevens’ “acts of the mind” but not with the “impersonal” or objectivist poetry of Pound or Williams. But time and the restrictions of this forum do not permit such speculations. What I want to do, then, is to trace out the variety of climatic vortices into which Stevens’ poetry has been swept, and to suggest why, more than any other modernist poet, he has been made to stand at the crossroads of contemporary criticism and thus, in a certain sense, become the displaced source of it.

Except for thatfeat of canonical exorcism called *The Pound Era* (which not so incidentally led to Bloom’s counter-canonical, the “Stevens era”), the various critical schools and modes which make up that din of dissent by which we recognize the modern critical dialogue have been consistently accommodating of Stevens. And even while Kenner relegates him, in *A Homemade World*, to a footnote of American parochialism, an “American Edward Lear,” it was not until Frank Lentricchia’s *After the New Criticism* that there has been any serious attempt to dislodge Stevens from the eccentric center of what some call post-modernism—and in Lentricchia’s case, as we will see, it is not so much a question of Stevens’ centrality as it is the dangerous supplement his writing represents.¹ Kenner’s era-gizing and

Lentricchia's moralizing aside, for the moment, we might recall that the beginning of Stevens' elevation into the critical canon was coincidental with the rise of the academic New Criticism, an aesthetic of formal closure that seemed at odds with his subjectivist, Romantic, open-ended, meditative kind of verse. The New Criticism was resilient enough, of course, to expand its spatial and hermetic preconceptions in order to account for a poetry of undeniable force and, if you will, originality; but as one can discover in such late masterpieces of formalist or aestheticist reading as Helen Vendler's *On Extended Wings*, the mixture of romantic self-consciousness, rhetorical extravagance, and quasi-philosophical reflection produced several reservations about a poetry that not only offended the Pound/Williams validation of objectivity and precision but playfully violated the decorums of the New Critics' intellectual lyric with its own irresponsible flaunting of a romantic epistemology.

But as Lentricchia puts it, the impact of Stevens' poetry from the beginning was to point a way "beyond" the New Criticism; and in his "fable for critics," he makes Stevens both the stimulus and the symptom of that "change of paradigm," to use Thomas Kuhn's phrase, that has led to post-modernist pluralism, the self-conscious retreat from the world into fiction, and has led to a nihilistic crisis in recent criticism that was the logical conclusion of Mallarmé's "crisis in poetry" nearly a century earlier. Lentricchia points specifically to the figure provided by Stevens' modernism in Frank Kermode's attack upon "spirits grown Eliotic" (the line is Allen Tate's) in his *Romantic Image*; and sets Kermode's text at once beside and in opposition to Northrop Frye's hypostatizing of Romance as the first major breach of New Critical formalism. Curiously enough, Lentricchia forgets that Stevens became for Frye a kind of modern avatar of Blake, and therefore, in a sense quite different from Kermode's, a modernist example of the mythopoetic poet; nor does he recognize yet another version of Romanticism, M. H. Abrams' *Natural Supernaturalism*, which makes Stevens a culminating figure in an unbroken history of Western literature. But whatever the Romanticism, it has ultimately culminated for Lentricchia in the curse of the modern narcissism and despair which also afflicted the New Criticism in the form of a post-Cartesian dualism and post-Kantian aesthetics, a retreat into the poem itself if not simply into the self and that ultimate dilemma of nihilism Lentricchia sees lurking at the end of any retreat from the "world" or "reality." (For Lentricchia reality would appear to be anything other than "text" taken in the literal sense. Lentricchia presumes to be making a political point about the dangers of Romanticism, but it is really the moralistic indictment of Yvor Winters returned to combat the latest form of irrationalism, deconstruction or the "new rhetoric." And ironically, though they came to different conclusions, both Lentricchia and Abrams ascribe to the same history that sees modern poetry and recent criticism as the inevitable continuity of a poetics that stresses the privilege of the imagination to the world which it struggles, successfully or not, to transform.)

The question about the climate of nihilism in contemporary theory, rejected alike by Lentricchia and Abrams, each for the wrong reason, I must postpone for the moment, but there is surely one inescapable truism in Lentricchia's "descanted" (or de:Kant-ed) history of criticism, to use the phrase of a young friend. Wallace Stevens, or a certain version of several Wallace Stevenses, has unquestionably become the "central man" of the most radical (in a non-political sense) of recent American criticisms. (One must discount, then, a history like Lentricchia's which indicts Stevens for his aestheticism and metaphysical pathos, his elitist and private language, and offers in opposition the idiom of Frost as an index of the poet speaking to and for the community of man—a history which, however, stumbles upon the crucial issue of modernist and post-modernist—again, a word I am becoming uneasy with—criticism.² One has only to point to the central figure of Stevens in both the practical and theoretical criticism of Bloom, and his epigrammatic place in the very different but complementary Romanticism of Geoffrey Hartman, to see the schematic accuracy of Lentricchia's centralizing of Stevens in a modernist "history," if not the moralistic, or better, dogmatic conclusion he draws from it. And to reinforce the evidence, recall the appropriateness, not to say adaptability, of that Stevens who would tie together the developments of Hillis Miller's career, from the phenomenology of *Poets of Reality* to the post-structuralist tenor of his latest essays. This is to say, Stevens seems to have provided the "ordinary" literary reference point for the so-called newest "Yale School," which, partly through advertisements for itself, has now become identified as a "deconstruction company." This necessarily discounts Paul de Man, whose literary models remain largely European and modern only in the sense that they are in his very special sense Romantic; and Jacques Derrida, who if he has heard of Stevens at all may think of him only as an American Mallarmé. And since Derrida and de Man are the theoretical core of the school, and only Miller among the doctrinaire "deconstructionists" employ Stevens as a central metaphorician, as it were, such histories of "schools" not yet accredited are at best useful for polemics.

In other words, the Stevens on whom Lentricchia centers the entire modern history of an abysmal nihilism, Stevens the aesthete, is hardly the one who turns up as a paradigm for the two major proponents of deconstructive criticism, and as for the other three, Stevens would seem to be at least four different poets: 1. the Gnostic poet of Bloom, who passes through the negative or skeptical abyss—which Bloom misconstrues as the deconstructive moment—in order to signify the "transumption" or overcoming that is America's and Emerson's answer to Europe and Nietzsche; 2. Hartman's provider of metaphors for the ultimate privilege of poetic warmth over philosophical coldness; 3. Miller's "sure questioner" suspended over the abyss of language who nevertheless offers us a "cure" for criticism's appetite to retrieve truth or knowledge from poetry, thereby making poetry a certain kind of undeceived discourse; 4. that Stevens who for all three signifies the privilege of poetry to philosophy and who can

thus provide the critique for all extant literary theories while offering a medium out of which to fashion a new one. Only for Miller would Stevens become the paradigm for the modernist as deconstructor, and Miller's Stevens is the one described by Lentricchia only if one accepts the latter's gross mis-reading of deconstruction as a purely textual practice which repeatedly arrives at the same conclusion, exposing everything beneath words as empty, a nothingness, and thereby leaving us to cling to fictions we know not to be true in order to avoid the void. Lentricchia finds deconstruction, or at least its twilight—since he gives it a history within a history—as a negative aestheticism and thus as the entropic culmination of the New Criticism. Deconstruction is for him—as it is, incidentally, for Bloom—only a reversal of the aestheticism (and thus the materialist textualism) of the New Criticism, and hence a reversal that repeats the very structure it negates or empties out. But, ironically, Lentricchia's admonition for a return to history and ordinary language, or a return to history through ordinary language, arrives at a similarly frosty impasse, and blindness. The hermeneutical circle of our climate is truly enough impoverished, a "merely going round," without the "pleasures" of circulating that Stevens projected.

The critical weather which today buffets our poems seems to fall into two distinct seasons. In effect, the difference is as moot as the auroras of autumn in California, or, to abuse a Stevens line, as the "tropics of resemblance." The argument divides, quite simply, into whether one views literature primarily in an aesthetic or in an ideological mode—that is, whether the poem is the "cry" of its own occasion, a thing or poem itself, or a cultural object, at once the issue and representation of a history which shaped it. (Neither definition, by the way, is sufficient, for as the best of our theoretical critics, Paul de Man, has argued, the aesthetic and the ideological can never be ultimately separated—as in Kant's third Critique, for example.) If the latter, as Lentricchia tends to argue, it would be at once the issue of its circumstances or determinations and a confirmation that modernism and the bourgeois worship of art had arrived at the end of (its) history: thus Stevens as bourgeois solipsist, an exemplary modern. But only because the exemplary modern holds the first position, that a poem is, in John Crowe Ransom's terms, a "precious object" or thing itself, or in Stevens', "part of the res itself and not about it." Critics like Lentricchia seem to accept this definition of Stevens' rhetorical poetry—that it is a self-referential or self-reflective linguistic object—all the while condemning those, from the New Criticism to the Newer Rhetoric, who in his view hold this solipsistic and immoral position. In the aesthetic view, the poem will, by a self-reflective or reflexive play, bear its own critical language within itself; in the ideological view, it demands an extra-poetic mode or discipline (philosophy, history, psychoanalysis, Marxism, and so on) which will provide an adequate language to explicate the poem. In either case, whether the language of criticism comes from inside or outside the poem (and the question here of inside/outside is the crucial one) the two positions remain

the same: criticism is the provision of an adequate external language (discursive, or descriptive) that opens up or frees the creative or internal language of the poem even as it effaces itself. Criticism in this view must be at once a metalanguage and a parasite that exhausts the poem and yet provides it with its nature as the true “site” of meaning, the “host” or proper word. And one other thing is thereby assumed: if poetic language has its own priority and privilege, is autotelic and/or self-reflexive, then the masterful and mastering language of criticism can only be a provisional translation into an underprivileged language. In the case of Stevens, Lentricchia assumes that the epistemological relation of imagination and reality (or subject and object), which demonstrates Stevens’ adherence to the Kantian aesthetic tradition, is at once an accurate description of his poetry and a symptom of the metaphysical pathos distinguishing that tradition which has uncritically assumed the mimetic play between poetry and philosophy, as Abrams insists. Thus Stevens, for Lentricchia, is both motive and model for all aesthetic criticism, which is to say, all recent philosophical criticism that engages philosophical and ideological “canniness” with its “irrational reasoning.”

Like Kermode, Abrams, and even Bloom, however, Lentricchia does not deviate from the position that allows the poet to legislate his own critical terms. All the different ideological criticisms, whether Abrams’ or Kermode’s history of (Romanticist) ideas or Bloom’s rhetoric—even Lentricchia’s curiously literal Marxism—allow Stevens to provide the critical terminology for his own poems; though each judges its consequences differently, each takes Stevens as the modernist representative of what Derrida called “white mythology” or a poetry that confirms the uneasy relation between poetry and philosophy in Western metaphysics. However different the ideologies, they each maintain the distinction between a poetic and a critical language, and the subordination of the latter to the former, a mimesis of the former by the latter. In this regard, there is no double bind, but only the issue of ideological judgment—of which critical language is better; or whether the creative language being judged belongs to some historical anachronism. (There is, however, a contradiction always at play here, as signified by Lentricchia’s identification of a responsible poetic language with idiomatic or ordinary language. It would seem that the poet in speaking directly to his fellow man—a Romantic dream, by the way—and not for him is responsible for maintaining the same commonality as the critic whose clarifications are necessarily self-effacing and non-elitist, while at the same time not celebrating the poem either as “object” or as complex and cryptic discourse.) One may argue, for example, whether Miller’s phenomenological dialectic of consciousness in *Poets of Reality*, or Bloom’s neo-rhetorical dialectic of tropes in *The Poems of Our Climate*, or even Abrams’ historical dialectic in *Natural Supernaturalism*, which takes Stevens as at once example and culmination of the Western tradition, is more or less adequate to the poem(s); or with Lentricchia agree that it is

and then condemn one dialectic as morally reprehensible while another is true. But the issue is the same—the search for a critical discourse adequate to the creative.

Now, the arrival of yet another new form of “aestheticism,” called deconstruction or textualism, would seem in no way to advance the question, especially since each of the previously named critics, excepting Miller, has already rushed to judge it as just another version of the old structure, unfortunately gone awry: thus Lentricchia’s story of Stevens’ appropriation by this strange discourse of continental nihilism, or Bloom’s view of “deconstruction” as a negative theology which Stevens, in a distinctly American way, answers with a “passion for yes,” and Abrams’ regret that this dangerous anti-humanism has been imported to destabilize the foundations of the “central” self upon which all poems turn and to which they owe their determinate and determining meanings. All, however, admit reluctantly that “deconstruction,” whatever it is, has become the tornado—the twister or trope—of our critical climate, and that those who have come to treat Stevens as if he were Nietzsche and not Emerson, are right if for the wrong reasons. For the humanist critics, essays like Miller’s (and even mine) in the Centenary volume (Princeton U.P., 1980) highlight the aberration of any poet who reflects upon the motives of metaphor, as if Eliot’s prophecy in “From Poe to Valéry,” that madness awaits anyone who reflects so much upon language as did Poe, had been realized in both the poet and his post-modern ventriloquists. Lentricchia merely assumes that we were correct in describing the inevitable submission of the poet to the pleasures of the text, and that the critics are merely following the lure of the poet which makes us all “Connoisseurs of Chaos.” The debates of modern criticism have regrettably become melodramatic and banal, and the Stevens we have gathered here to (mis-)read has, probably to his grave surprise, been thrust into its dialogical heat. The issue, simply stated, is whether deconstruction is the appropriate method for reading Stevens or any poet—a method intrinsic to poetic or literary texts in general, but especially post-Romantic or modernist literature, even when it seems to disturb everything held meaningful by literary humanism. Or whether it is only the latest ideological lie against reason, as Bloom claims poems are “lies against time.” But this is to presume, quite wrongly, that deconstruction is a method, one among others, or even a reading program or strategy adapted to certain kinds of texts. Despite their very different conclusions about its pertinence to literature in general and Stevens in particular, Bloom and Lentricchia agree on one thing—deconstruction is a negative theology or skeptical method, and while for Bloom Stevens has borne us beyond this impasse while leaving us with its memory, for Lentricchia he is the sign of our continuing self-indulgence.

The critical debate, then, might best be described as turning upon the calculated misreading of deconstruction—whatever “it” is?—rather than of Stevens. We are involved in a misconstruction that demands its own clearing; so that we can understand why a critic like Miller can claim that we

cannot deconstruct Stevens because his texts are already self-deconstructions, yet must insist that his own reading of deconstructive moments in Stevens is intended to challenge the claims of other methods to read him properly. It might be prudent, then, to discount the word, if not the notion, "deconstruction," and substitute instead the notion of "strong reading," were it not for the perils of misunderstanding that attend such a notion of "mis-reading" as Bloom advocates. In any event, it would be impossible to describe in brief or in a descriptive mode just what deconstruction is, if it is, as Derrida points out, at once a methodical strategy for opening a reading and an interference with or disruption of method, a *pas de method* to underscore his phrase, in which the *pas*, meaning at the same time "step" and "not," or being at the same time a nominative and a negative, indicates the disturbance in every reading which begins to attend to the way language breaks its own laws. In this sense, that enfolds a nonsense, deconstruction has already begun in every text, and not just in literature, because whatever the text there is already at work at least two texts or two languages—that is, an intertextual exchange that Derrida explores on the model of translation and transformation, and de Man on the model of a rhetorical *aporia* that opens up in every attempt to define the function of trope or figural language, to generate a metalanguage or metacriticism.

Stevens, then, is not a poet unique in his fixation upon language or the "motive for metaphor," not simply a post-modern or avant-garde performer in the "Theatre of Trope," but only one of the more extravagant recent instances where the "turn toward language" has surfaced to reveal and renew once again a crisis in criticism. Without asking whether such and such an interpretation or "reading" of a poem is "deconstructive" or otherwise, we might ask, though in its asking the question is not innocent and is already a quotation, just where the deconstructive linguistic "moment" may reside in a Stevens text or con-texts. We already know some of the questions deconstruction posits, or better, de-positions: first, the question of the subject, and in regard to Stevens, the very notion of a creative or genetic imagination; second, the determinacy of the other, or in Stevens' terms, the ontological status or "ground" of any "reality" outside consciousness, and of any consciousness outside language, and so on; third, any binary relation, whether it suggests the stability of oppositions, as in structuralism, or is revolved into a hierarchy which privileges one term over the other, as occurs with dizzying effect in Stevens' play between tropes of imagination and tropes of reality; and fourth, the impossibility of arriving at any metalanguage that might stabilize or master the play or performance of the text, and by extension, the impossibility of ever determining within any text the absolute demarcation between a critical and a creative language, or what de Man calls the irreducible difference between the cognitive and the performative. In other words, deconstruction posits by de-positioning the impossibility of any text (or texts) achieving that self-reflexivity which is fundamental to our defining and privileging the notion of literature or poetry as a unique, closed discourse.

As we have seen, Stevens criticism, of whatever ideology, never really deviates from the assumption that the problematic of his poems rests on his (as well as criticism's) incapacity to decode or resolve the epistemological relativism of subject and object. While a deconstructive reading, so-called, might begin by reminding itself that this harassed epistemology is already inscribed in Stevens as a linguistic and textual tangle, not as a psychology, and hence that the polarities he engages have never been stabilized, or better, that they exist only in the structures of language. It might begin by arguing that what Stevens does is appropriate these concepts from philosophy and revolve them into tropes: that is, trope them, at once undermining their conceptual power and revealing that in belonging to language they are a part of our power to signify or to produce multiple significations, the "merely going round" that undoes as surely as it "cures" the "ground" (see Miller's recent essays). Deconstruction, then, does not empty out language but disturbs the illusion of language's ontological status—not however as a nihilism in the vulgar sense of meaninglessness but as a prelude to "dissemination." Deconstruction has as its fundamental project not the denial of meaning but the disruption of closure, in whatever text, and thus it challenges the totalitarianism of reading. Or to put it all too simply, deconstruction keeps pointing up those moments when the illusion of self-reflexivity in a text breaks down, whether upon an undecidable sign or a rhetorical crux, and where in this catachresis a play takes over that we may call spermatic, dis-semic, or even poetic, if we do not forget that the poetic, from Plato's time at least, was associated with the lawlessness of language, with *paidia*.

Deconstruction can remind us that the essential concept for reading as well as describing literature is its self-referential or self-reflexive nature, and this is as true of a notion of realistic or representational fiction, which accentuates the reciprocity between the figural and the literal, as it is of the New Critics' autotelic poem. Self-reflexivity permits what Kant called the freeplay of poetic language, while at the same time protecting the world of reality from the dangers of such frivolousness. The question of reading Stevens for most of his critics has been a question of finding the adequate method to define the play between a language of sounds without meaning, or what he called "life's nonsense" which "pierces us with strange relation," and those aphoristic and quasi-philosophical metaphors about metaphor, language, poetry, and the like. That is, we have been forced to pursue logically through his most alogical (and for some hedonistic) twirling of words a dialectical line that will make the poem comment coherently upon itself: "poetry is the subject of the poem"; and this assertion, you will remember, suggests that whatever the itinerary of sounds and nuances the poem makes, it must eventually return to the solidity of the statement. Whether one calls his poems meditations or philosophical lyrics, variations on a theme or visionary rhetoric, the principle that underlies such descriptions points us toward the dialectical moment of sublation, where the negated meaning is restored and the poem closed: for Bloom the move-

ment from *tropos* to *topos*; for the formalist or thematic critic, a resolution of those variations on a theme, a reduction of the poem to its logical assertion of the illogical. Deconstruction can only remind us that such closures belong not to the poems, which are readings themselves, but to the readings of the poems which have grown tired of Stevens' challenge to, if not lack of, seriousness. Stevens' poems should be allowed to weather such calm, and to pass beyond it, but that would require another kind of reading, perhaps a "theory of reading," or as Stevens would put it—"pages of illustrations."

"Pages of illustrations"—I want to offer now, in conclusion, a textual case in point, though not necessarily as a deconstructive reading, or in any case, not as anything like an exhaustive reading of a poem. And I take my example—all the while reminding you that deconstruction perforce recognizes that the exemplary can never prove the case—from a poem which appears to many critics to be the most affirmative or triumphant of the late Stevens pieces, at least as regards the poet's desire to escape narcissism or solipsism and once again, whatever that could mean, "walk naked in reality." That poem, you might have guessed, is "Credences of Summer," a moment of apogee and not apology in the poet's emotional weather; a poem which seems to say, in a calm that leaves the indulgences of *Harmonium* far behind, that one can pass beyond spring's "infuriations" and pause before the absences or "exhalations" of autumn, and see, even if the mediations or fictions of poetry leave their trace, the world again as if for the first time, directly or without "evasion" by language.

In "Credences" one arrives at a rhetorical moment which claims that what you see is what you get, where what is sensed makes sense, beyond enigma. This desire to become "an ignorant man again," as in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," to achieve "poet's metaphors in which being would/ / Come true," as in "Description without Place," to become the "latest freed man" and realize the "figure" that is "not/ An evading metaphor"—such metaphors proliferate in Stevens' canon—is to arrive at the ultimate moment of "repose" that Bloom celebrates as transumption and Lentricchia condemns as a narcissistic retreat into fictions. Thus "Credences":

Postpone the anatomy of summer, as
The physical pine, the metaphysical pine.
Let's see the very thing and nothing else.
Let's see it with the hottest fire of sight.
Burn everything not part of it to ash.

Trace the gold sun about the whitened sky
Without evasion by a single metaphor.
Look at it in its essential barrenness
And say this, this is the centre that I seek.

The Stevens problematic is joined in these metaphors which would (almost) murder metaphor. His characteristic style, especially in the later poetry, is evident here in the rhetorical play between what appears as at once a statement of desire and a statement of fact, but which, even in isolation, undermines or tropes its own rhetoric into the indeterminate status of an aphorism, in which "saying" is at the same time "seeing" and "seeking." Even if one were to pass over the vocabulary of "trace" and "sun" in the most remarkable of these metaphors—figures which have, some will recognize, a crucial place in deconstructive readings of theories of metaphor—there is no ignoring the irony of a statement protesting the negative or mediating force of metaphor that can only be made in the most vivid of metaphors. To trace the gold sun is to trace a trace, a sun not seen except in the colorations of language. To "see the very thing" is to pass through the fiction of perception, to achieve an "ignorance" or "innocence" by a process of Nietzschean forgetting.³ Thus the "hottest fire of sight" (a mixed metaphor at best) is a figure of cancellation or blindness, not that caused by looking directly at the sun but that caused by averting our self-consciousness. In other words, the poem states by metaphorical indirection that the ideal of pure or unmediated perception is a philosophical construction and would be realized in a poem only if the poem purified its own means or burned away its own representational language.

One never encounters the "sun" in Stevens without confronting this complication. Recall the familiar critical distribution of sun and moon as figures respectively of reality and imagination in Stevens' symbology—a polarity imposed upon us by his poetry as well as his criticism, but a polarity which is as systematically undone as it is systematically inscribed. As we have seen, Stevens' criticism has reified these poles as more or less things in themselves, denoted by proper names, and then read their exchanges or interrelationships in terms of a shifting priority of the one to the other, as Stevens' skeptical encounter at once with traditional epistemology and with experience: thus Lentricchia's solipsistic and Bloom's pragmatic Stevens; thus the phenomenological readings of Stevens as a "realist of the imagination." But it is just the question of deciding which term is primary and which secondary that produces the contention in any reading of Stevens, since to read him properly means to decide on one or the other as the "centre that I seek." In "Credences of Summer," apparently, the mind or self foregoes its claims for the origin and center, effaces itself and reappears as a reflection: "as/ The physical pine, the metaphysical pine." In what sense is the sun physical, or even the origin of the physical; or to put it another way, in what sense is sense primary? In the sense, perhaps, that the "primary noon" of "The Motive for Metaphor" is an "X," that is, already a trope, a chiasmus, an originally doubled or extended figure.⁴ The sun is never properly seen; yet the act of seeing (and tracing) is said to reduce everything to ashes or to burn away the exterior in a way that will unveil the "very thing," the "essential barrenness." The "sun," indeed, is a figure for the act of seeing, of burning away, and seeing is a trope, a trope of troping.

If we are to trace the “gold sun” about the “whitened sky,” then, we are to trace and efface a figure. The poet is in search of a metaphor that will be adequate to, or not evade, a “primary” metaphor.

But note, either the “gold sun” or “physical pine,” the origin and issue of summer, can only be traced by a metaphor that effaces, burns away our consciousness of figurality. To arrive at “summer,” the “centre that I seek,” is to achieve an unmediated vision by forgetting; since summer, which follows spring’s “infuriations” and precedes fall’s “exhalations,” is like a moment in a breath—or quite simply, it is a trope that falls in a tropological sequence, a trope that suddenly appears as a thing, visible and physical. The primary, then, is secondary; and the secondary (trope) primary—just as in the relation of sun and moon. The “centre” at which one arrives is a “credence,” and is produced in one’s “saying,” a perception that is only a “trace” or which exists only in the structure of language: “Look at it in its essential barrenness! And say this, this is the centre that I seek.”⁵

Summer, that is, is a most arresting season; and if one wants to chart the dialectics of this poem he will have to recognize that it cannot close because it has no opening. The plenitude of summer does not precede and lead to fall, nor does it bring the passions of spring to a moment when word and thing, seer and seen, self and world, are one. The physical pine is not something itself that is a simple reversal of a paradigmatic or “Platonic perhaps” tree, as Ransom’s line puts it. The “physical” too is at once literal and figural, or irreducibly a trope. To burn away every exterior or every representation in order “to see the very thing and nothing else,” to reduce everything to the “centre” of one’s desire, is still to arrive at what the poem calls an “eternal foliage,” or to the metaphysical folded in the physical, to poetic “leaves” (cf. Whitman’s leaves of grass) or metaphors whose “meaning” is in their sensory or irrational folds. Despite the poem’s admonition, Stevens cannot postpone what in another title he calls the “anatomy of figuration.” The “eternal foliage” is a figure for the poem. The poet’s desire for a “barrenness” fixed in this “eternal foliage” or figuration exposes the nature of nature, as relentlessly as Nietzsche exposes the metaphoricity of any “thing-in-itself.” To burn everything away to one’s pure sense of it is still to remain within the realm of “sense,” and as Nietzsche has revealed, the realm of the sensory is always already metaphorical. A sense is a stimulus, he argues in that metaphysical fable, “Truth and Falsity in the Non-Moral Sense,” and hence a “First metaphor”: “a nerve stimulus first transformed into a percept,” and each subsequent substitution, of a sound which we make stand for the percept and the word/concept which we make stand for the sound, is a figure of a figure. Nor can we, in the same sense, trace back through the traces to some “essential” which is itself not already a trace or a representation. Nietzsche again: man “forgets that the original metaphors of perception *are* metaphors, and takes them for things themselves,” and this is what allows him to situate a cause before an effect, an imagination at the origin of reality, or a reality at the center of appearance; and at the same time allows him to proceed from the notion of self to the

"centre" by an act of forgetting himself as an "artistically creating subject." We forget, Nietzsche says, "that the insect and the bird perceive a world different from our own" and that the question of which perception is right or adequate is a "senseless one." Rather than truth, the center that we seek is aesthetic, but not in the sense that Lentricchia sees it, as a world of fiction that lies in contrast to a more substantial world of reality. We live in constructions that are "credences," and hard it is "in spite of blazoned days."

This is a scene which Stevens' poems endlessly revolve: thus the "sun" of canto three is conceived in the figure of a man reading a text which is at the same time illuminated by him, and the reality of the physical perceived in canto four is presented not to the "clairvoyant eye" but to the "secondary senses of the ear," the "Pure rhetoric of a language without words." The "senses" still belong to language, to rhetoric, even if that rhetoric of the senses (or of sensation) precedes words.

The move from metaphor to metaphor, or this displacement of one figure by another, which Stevens celebrates as the inherently poetic nature of nature, or reveals to be a nature that is structured like a language, at once opens up the abyss beneath what one wants to know as the substance of things (the metaphysical that undergirds the physical), and carries us beyond (meta) the physical. Thus a poem can become a ground or "rock of summer," but a ground that is always already figural. That is why Stevens' late poetry only feigns a dialectical movement, and does not, as Lentricchia suggests, wallow in the "mortal no," or as Bloom insists, entertain the negative only as a strategic moment in the agon of transumption, the "passion for yes." The play of imagination and reality in the poetic scene has long since begun, just as the relation of visible and invisible rock already exists in the presuppositions of Western metaphysics, that "white mythology," as Derrida calls it, which works to make us forget that its concepts are, in truth, tropes, and thus not *in Truth*, not "The the." The invisible has been spun out of the vortex or saturnalia of the visible, that is, out of the play of tropes.

Thus in canto seven of "Credences," the turning of the "thrice concen-tered self," which itself is neither origin nor issue of the "object" it tropes or "averts," is itself no more and no less than a trope. Thus the "stratagems" of canto eight, which allow us to discover the self or "man's mind" as the unreal behind the "real." Thus the drama of canto nine, where the human self senses that the bird's perception of things is "another complex of emotions" than man's, and hence another language. But he can only think of it, as Nietzsche said of the perception of birds, as a language different from our own. We cannot help but think of nature as anthropomorphic, or, as Paul de Man has shown us, as tropological. Language, then, is not a fragile bridge over an abyss nor an empty fiction without ground, but the "real" in every sense, the "sense" of every real. Reality belongs to the realm of judgment, and not truth; the aesthetic and not the cognitive. The cognitive is inscribed in the aesthetic, the critical in the creative, to the point that they can never be absolutely distinguished nor reduced to one univocal "word." Poetry postpones the "anatomy" of summer, or any effort to describe the

real in an adequate language, to represent the metaphysical in the physical; and it leaves us with a climate of "characters," or an anatomy of figuration. The final canto of "Credences" brings us to a physical world that, far from being burned away to ashes, can be called nothing other than a plenitude of trope, a world (or better, scene) in which the "personae of summer play the characters/ Of an inhuman author, who meditates/ With the gold bugs, in blue meadows, late at night." In this "Theatre of Trope," this spectrum of colored masks, the allusion to Poe and to cryptology is only slightly masked. The inhuman author—that anthropomorphized nature—"does not hear his characters talk./ He sees them mottled in the moodiest costumes." This scene, this spectrum of tropes, is the poem—words which do not talk or mean, in one sense, so that they appear only as pure sense, in both senses (aesthetic/cognitive) of that word. But their sense lies in their relation one to the other. Like tropes, they signify only in a play of relations with other tropes, and mean only in the space of this tropological play—"Complete in a completed scene, speaking/ Their parts as in a youthful happiness."

What is at stake here, in a poem that asserts the desire to "trace" the "gold sun" in its orbit, "without evasion by a single metaphor," when as Aristotle first taught us, or made us self-conscious, it is precisely the sun that cannot be traced, let alone directly sensed, especially in its eclipse? The sun cannot be sensed or seen directly, and appears most real when it is beyond sense, eclipsed and thus yclept or named in its absence, beneath or beyond the horizon, or when it appears in its reflection, as "mental moonlight," to use another Stevens figure. It is precisely the "sun" that is the name for metaphor, the metaphor of metaphor, a misnomer for that which, as the poet/father says to the ephebe in "Notes," will "bear no name"—will not be what it bears, will not bare what it is, will not be a "bearer-being" in the phrase from yet another poem. For every poem in Stevens which offers us the escape from intelligence, "almost successfully," there is another that marks this "innocence" or "ignorance" as always already figural, a "world of words to the end of it" ("Description without Place"):

Yet to speak of the whole world as metaphor
Is still to stick to the contents of the mind

And the desire to believe in a metaphor.
It is to stick to the nicer knowledge of
Belief, that what it believes in is not true.

("The Pure Good of Theory")

Of course, this is what rationalist critics, wearing "square hats," condemn as the immoralism or the nihilism of the indulgent aesthete—from the cold of Yvor Winters to the francophobia of Lentricchia.

What is implied in this "desire," to use a similar figure from "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," that wants to achieve the still-point where "vision

and desire are the same," where "Reality is a thing seen by the mind" (and thus where to *see* or perception is already a metaphor, "truth" as "apprehended" and hence also a captive), and where "We seek// The poem of pure reality, untouched/ By trope or deviation, straight to the word"? In every instance, "reality" is never other than the otherness of the "word" that stands in its stead, a "res itself" that is a "transfixing object" or a figure which, as Nietzsche has told us, is a "forgotten" displacement—a view, in Stevensian words, of "New Haven, say, through a certain eye," an I which has a stance or (in)stead only in "simple seeing, without reflection." But "without reflection" does not mean "before," and only in a "certain" sense can it mean "beyond." Innocence in Stevens is not something that has preceded a fall into experience, but is the metaleptic issue of the "deviations" of metaphor, what "We seek" through and beyond "trope."

"Credences of Summer" appears as one of three major "long" poems in the volume with which its title shares a figure, *Transport to Summer*, the book in its turn sharing a seasonal relation to *The Auroras of Autumn*. The titular metaphors should not, especially since they come so close together and contain poems that are only slightly modified in style and tone, be considered expressions of the poet's own seasons. A decade does not a generation make. It is the "transport" of the title, therefore, which should hold us, or better turn our attention, moreso than the season, transport being itself another figure of figure, indeed a trope of turning as well as of transcendence. (Or as Heidegger might have noted, a trope of ecstasy or the ek-stase, a certain going beyond or out of its [one]self.) *Transport to summer* clearly posits no such thing as an arrival, either at a place or at a point (summit or apogee of some cycle), and far from naming summer as a conclusive or pure moment, the title names the season as itself transporting, thus a trope which would have its independent character and identity only if we forgot that it was a part of an ever metabolizing series, that which is at once a moment and a place (an apogee and crossing), a time of presence that is never present to itself or "complete" unless we name it as part of a "completed scene." The seasonal cycle is thus only a totalized tropic sequence, without beginning or end.

"Summer," that is, is a "name" in a generalized code that includes "spring's infuriations" and autumn's "exhalations," or a phase within the cycle of a breath or an articulation. It is the "time" that Stevens calls, in "Someone Puts a Pineapple Together," the "tropic of resemblance," and therefore *resembles*, to mark the moment, the "place" of "primary noon" in another of his favorite cycles (almost a cliché): the moment of the "X" or crossing/gathering, of the chiasmus, that he features in a poem like "The Motive for Metaphor." "Summer," like "primary noon," is not an unmediated or transcendental moment, not the moment in which every substitution is effaced or effaces itself in "face of the object." It is instead a doubled moment in a tropic sequence, the moment of the most intense resemblance; it is the fictive moment of "green's green apogee," or of the word transformed into the thing itself, into "nature." Summer is at once the most

intense moment of forgetting—hence another name for the poem, a meta- and a metonym, or misnomer—and the most stylized fiction (a “nicer knowledge”) of innocence. Summer is at once the culmination of spring and the beginning of fall, between in- and ex-halation. “Credences,” as that titular figure indicates, ritualizes this moment of crossing and turning of subjugation and capture (as in canto vii), or that moment when poetic language appears also as natural language, the fictive as the real. It is a season of “substitutes” and “stratagems” (not only of strategic maneuvers but of the relating of strata of figurations), and thus offers us as “sight” that which is also (and perhaps only) “memory,” not the thing itself but only displacements and replacements of “what is not” (canto viii).

The trope that displaces displaces nothing, but is originally in-stead. It is genetic, then, only in the sense that the genesis is a law that exceeds or breaks the law, that generation is an always already dis-re-placement. The “trumpet” or announcement of beginnings “supposes that/ A mind exists”; the “cry” is “clarion,” both announcement of that which will appear and, as “dictior’s way,” the appearance that precedes what it stands for. Mind, that is, does not announce itself and then appear, divided, in language. But mind is (if it can have any bearing here) language, or better, language is the sign of mind, itself originary when it is “aware of division.” Summer is the predominant, but not singular, trope of this primary mind/language that is what Stevens calls elsewhere the “fecund minimum” (“The Comedian as the Letter C”), or what in “Credences” he names “green’s green apogee,” an irreducible multiplicity, a Derridean *difference*.

One could pursue this interrogation, but it would lead not beyond or behind the “cry” that is so fundamental a figure in Stevens. We might, for example, pursue the figure of the “rock,” here the “rock of summer” that at first appears so much more concrete or physical than the titular figure of that later poem, “The Rock,” in which, as Hillis Miller has shown, it serves as a figure of the metaphysical which is always folded in some physical name and thus can only appear as the ungrounding moment or “Abgrund” which poetry effects within language, which poetry offers us as a “cure” of our illusions that there is an absolute bottom or metaphysical end-point to our “desire” for such. Even here, in his most physical “metaphysical” poem, Stevens can offer the “rock of summer” or the “visible” as no more than “characters” or “personae,” a plural rock(s) in a scene (that is not, as it were, seen, except as a fiction). The “rock of summer” is the poem as “illustrious scene,” the “vital son.” The poem entertains this rock, or as it were names itself, as a reality, just as in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” the poem discourses on itself as a “res” itself. In “Credences,” to note only the transitional sixth canto, it names itself as the “extreme” moment of “repose” or displacement/repossession in which, to recall “Notes,” we forget that the “first idea” resides only in a “hermit’s metaphors” and come to believe that the poem is something like a “hermit’s truth,” which is to say, a “symbol in hermitage.” A symbol is “hermitage,” both literally and figuratively, if one can use the name literally for the figurative. Home is another

metaphor for metaphor. But in this case, Stevens is precise. Tropes are metaphors. Are all metaphors tropes? Not necessarily. At least in one sense a trope, as part of a sequence or series, is "real"; and thus Stevens' turning of the notions of "real" and "unreal," like those of "bearer" and "being," indicate that in the "Theatre of Trope," or in poetry, this undecidable yet decisive moment is "supreme." Summer is not a summation or proper name, but only the illusion and the "illustrious" moment of what an unmediated moment might be, as in a poem that seems like something "Complete in a completed scene." Yet it is also no more than another dawn, whether a spring or the "auroras" of autumn. The summer/poem is never beyond "trope or deviation" nor purified of the "intricate evasions of as" ("New Haven") even when it "seems" so. Especially when it seems so—like summer seeming to be eternal; like autumn seeming to be the philosopher's, and the critics', season of genuine reflection; like winter which is the "accent of deviation in the living thing" ("A Discovery of Thought"). And so on.

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Notes

¹I will not offer here a detailed bibliography of the critical texts discussed or referred to in these pages. The books and essays should be generally familiar to those aware of the contemporary critical dialogues, and to those concerned more particularly, if more narrowly, with "Stevens criticism."

²In a recent series of public lectures on the socio-textuality of modernism, Frederick Jameson has attempted to give the modernist movement of the last half-century a "history," which also includes a history of the criticism it has inspired. He identifies the canonical elevation of Stevens in the late sixties and early seventies with what he calls "high modernism," and, somewhat in the temper of Lentricchia, though with more subtlety, links Stevens' influence on a certain development of American criticism with the textual fetishism characteristic with modernism's attempted withdrawal from history.

³Cf. the following "Adagia," which at once play with the dream of unmediated perception and dispatch any such illusion: "Perhaps there is 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"; "The tongue is an eye"; "The eye sees less than the tongue says. The tongue says less than the mind thinks." Even in the first, the "perhaps" and the "possible" defer the illusion of an "immediate" perception and mark it as a fiction. In Stevens every immediacy is already displaced: "Metaphor creates a new reality from which the original appears to be unreal." (*Opus Posthumous*, 166, 167, 170, 169)

⁴Jacques Derrida, in his "Hors Livre" (or as it is translated, "Outwork"), the preface on prefaces to the three other essays which with "Hors Livre" make up the quadrangular text *Dissemination*, notes parenthetically that the chiasmus "can be considered a quick thematic diagram of dissemination or of those excessive and unregulate effects of language (of which literature is our most notable resource)." Derrida offers instead of the monolinear and univocal idea of "work" and "book," that dream of Western man to arrive at the moment Stevens calls "clairvoyant observation." Derrida, taking the lower case Greek sign of the chiasmus or "x" as his emblem (though he always resists the notion of an example adequate to its idea), notes that the chiasmus is not only foursided and therefore a breaking open of the dream of triangulation (the diagram of dialectic), but that the fourth "foot" is somewhat oedipal, swollen, extended, excessive—and thus that a preface, which might be thought to organize a work, which itself has been written after the text and yet is placed before it, which announces at the start what is to be arrived at but announces it belatedly because a preface must have been written after what it introduces, a "preface" therefore is chiasmatic in that it is at once crossing and disorganization, reminder and remainder.

⁵In "saying" his desire, the Stevensian poet marks its fictionality, and in the irony of one of his "Adagia": "The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly" (*Opus Posthumous*, 163). This is, of course, virtually repeated at the end of the second section of his poem "The Pure Good of Theory," in a passage quoted a few pages further on in this essay.

The Motive For Metaphor: Stevens and Derrida

PATRICIA A. PARKER

Ah Sun-flower! weary of time,
Who contest the steps of the Sun:
Seeking after that sweet golden clime
Where the travellers journey is done.

Where the Youth pined away with desire,
And the pale Virgin shrouded in snow:
Arise from their graves and aspire,
Where my Sun-flower wishes to go.

Blake's "Sun-flower," like the discussion of metaphor in Derrida's "La Mythologie blanche," takes as its focus the figure and teleological obsession of the heliotrope, the flower which turns with the sun and whose turning reflects the turning of the sun, its trajectory from East to West and finally back to its point of origin, the beginning and end of tropic desire. Derrida, in the final sections of this famous essay, writes: "The trope of metaphor always implies a sensible kernel, or rather something which, like what is sensible, may always fail to be present actually and in person. And the sun, in this respect, is above all the sensible signifier of what is sensible." Yet for that very reason, "the sensible sun is always improperly known and therefore im-properly named"; the sun is "the paradigm of what is sensible *and* of what is metaphorical: it regularly turns (itself) and hides (itself)." There are, then, in effect, two suns: one which figures this sensible origin and Light and one whose turning moves it first away and then back again. Both metaphor and turning sun participate in the melancholy, as in the hope, of absence and distance. The sun begins in the place of Light, the East, but wanders away from it before returning, at last, to its source and end. But metaphor as well—at least within a certain familiar conception of this "flower of rhetoric"—is understood as just such an orbit or circular return, as a deviation and errancy comprehended within a plot of eventual recuperation, "the wandering and returning story of the 'proper' meaning." As the turning of the sun is seen as "a reflecting circle, returning to itself with no loss of sense, no irreversible expenditure," this heliotropic metaphor is cast teleologically as an only "*provisional* loss of meaning," set within "the horizon of a circular reappropriation of the proper sense," the "second coming, the self-presence of the idea in its light." Within this "teleology of sense," metaphor is both detour and return tour, leading finally to "the manifestation of truth as an unveiled presence, to the regaining of language in its fullness *without syntax*, to a pure *calling by name*."¹

The apocalyptic resonance of this plot of bringing to light returns in Derrida's own more recent work—in *Glas*, in *La Carte postale*, and in an essay

on “apocalyptic tone” in philosophy.² But in “*La Mythologie blanche*,” though it never surfaces in name, the buried link between metaphor understood as deviation or detour and the East-West trajectory of the sun is a long-standing one: the connection, verbal, philosophical, rhetorical, between metaphor understood from Cicero and Quintilian forward as *translatio verbi*—a “trans-lation” or displacement of a word from its proper meaning and proper place—and the tradition (based on the orbit of the sun) which sees all things mediate (history, language, temporality) as part of a *translatio imperii*, or *studii*, the translation of empire, culture and learning from East to West and back to the Light or East again. Historically, it is a matter of the Spirit, a principle of exile or exodus which produces historical change: as Curtius puts it, “The concept of *translatio* . . . implies that the transference of dominion from one empire to another is the result of a sinful misuse of that dominion” (a conception of insufficiency deriving from its biblical context but also recalling other versions of the flight of Minerva’s owl). It is this model of a detour through history which structures countless poems on the “progress of poesy,” from Hölderlin, Schiller and Keats to Wallace Stevens’ repeated meditations on “The Westwardness of Everything” (“Our Stars Come from Ireland”) and which appears as the controlling figure of Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* in a passage cited by Derrida: “The Sun—the Light—rises in the East. . . . The History of the World travels from East to West.”³ Hegel’s transumption of this ancient *translatio* and its telos, indeed, not only rehearses the familiar movement away from and back to Light but casts it within a plot of *Aufhebung*, or *Erinnerung*—the conversion of the objective or external Sun into an inner Sun, the final end or motive of history itself as the labour of the mediate, a conversion which also seeks to heal the Cartesian split between subject and object.

In the classical and neoclassical descriptions of metaphor to which Derrida’s essay has recourse, the fundamental split is that between “metaphor” (as a figure for figuration in general) and the “proper,” and thus the concomitant association of metaphor with displacement and movement (the etymological resonance, we might note here, of the “motive” in Stevens’ “Motive for Metaphor”). In Cicero and Quintilian, metaphor is both alien—in a place not its own—and improper (*improprium*), both a deviation from the proper term and literally “out of place.” But it is also in this tradition what Puttenham in the *Arte of English Poesie* termed the “figure of TRANSPORT”—an association which Derrida literalizes in his play on the continuing sense of *metaphorikos* in modern Greek as “means of transport” in an essay entitled “The *Retrait* of Metaphor,” which begins with a lettraset illustration of various kinds of transportational vehicles—buses, trucks and cars.⁴ This conception of metaphor as movement, displacement or transport is, indeed, already implicit in the *phora* of the *epiphora* of Aristotle’s well-known definition of metaphor in the *Poetics*: “Metaphor consists in giving (*epiphora*) the thing a name that belongs to something else” (1457b 6-9, Bywater trans.): at the other end of this history,

so to speak, Stevens' own playing on the Greek *phora*—the suffix of transport or bearing—in the figure of Phosphor (Latin, “Lucifer”) might remind us that much of the twentieth-century debate over the nature and epistemological status of metaphor takes the form of a highly Stevensian meditation on the connection between Evening and Morning Star.

What I wish to argue in this essay—and in the discussion of Stevens' own “Motive for Metaphor” with which it will conclude—is that both Stevens' repeated meditations on the trope of metaphor and at least one possible way of reading the difficult syntax of “The Motive for Metaphor” subsume even as they recall this link between metaphor as *translatio* and the East-West movement of the sun, between the displacements and deviations of metaphor as a figure for figuration and “The Westwardness of Everything.” But we must first look at one other version of the teleological plot in which, as in Derrida's essay, that errancy or movement has traditionally been cast. Derrida speaks, in his discussion of the “philosophical” conception of metaphor, of the deviant figure's eventual leading to the “Second Coming” of an “unveiled presence,” or unshadowed light—even if only to the light of the “Enlightenment,” *Aufklärung*, or *Lumières*. But the theological original of this bringing to light also drew on the model of the *translatio* of the sun and on a plot of conversion, a trajectory which might be both return and “translation” in the sense of elevation to a higher plane. Metaphor, in the Christian or, more specifically, Augustinian tradition still powerful as a resonance of many of the poems of the poet who styled himself a “dried-up Presbyterian,”⁵ stands in its errancy and deviance as one of the signs of the Fall, of that act through which man himself became an “alien,” exiled in a place of displacement which, perhaps, also provided the motive for poetry (“From this the poem springs: that we live in a place / That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves,” “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” “It Must Be Abstract,” IV). In the influential terms of this tradition, metaphor is the sign of exile both from Light and from an ultimate apocalyptic Identity, a disababling and even crippling distance from a presence in which, to paraphrase Augustine (*Confessions* XII, 13) on St. Paul, man will know “not in part, not in enigmas” but “face to face,” “all at once,” without the “succession” of history or syntax, without what Stevens calls the “rotted names” (*The Man with the Blue Guitar*, XXXII).

Metaphor in this tradition is understood as the shadowy or umbral, as a retreat from or evasion of the Light. But its shadowy shrinking from the Light is also finally part of a return to that Light: it is thus not only *umbra* but adumbration, a fore-shadowing of the final apocalyptic presence or Identity figured traditionally as the shadowless light of the sun at noon, a return through the detour and exile of figures, as of history, to man's proper place. Metaphor in this plot of exodus and return shares in the melancholy of exile and evasion; but it also participates in what Derrida calls an “eschatology of the proper,” in which the transport or movement of metaphor is both exile and return, its motive the eventual overcoming of the distance from that Light which is its end. The conception of metaphor

as *translatio* is here too inseparable from the melancholy and hope of the figure of westering, from the tropic turning of the sun and its final return to Light. George Herbert, in "The Church-Militant," traces the movement of all of fallen history from its source in the East—and Light fallen from—to its return there, the definitive apocalyptic conferring of Identity and meaning, the shadowless noon sun of the Last Judgment. He is careful, at this end, to separate the turning sun from the true Sun it merely "figures," just as Donne can write in one of his *Sermons* that "Christ is not so called Light, as he is called a Rock or a Cornerstone; not by a metaphore, but truly and properly." The Light of this noon sun, without shadow and beyond "error," is the ultimate end (in the sense both of goal and of motive) of metaphor as of all things which mediate to that end, the Second Coming of the shadowless Light which is Christ, or, in our culture, the dominant "X."

The persistence of this *translatio* tradition from medieval historiography to Hegel to Stevens' meditations on both westering and metaphor may allow us to note here that the older parousial or apocalyptic impulse (in theology or, secularized, in the Enlightenment) has its modern counterparts in the ongoing attempts to purge language of its error and deviance, to regain a purity if not of transcendent truth then of the object or objective world, a project shared in part by Stevens himself. "We seek / The poem of pure reality, untouched / By trope or deviation, straight to the word, / Straight to the transfixing object" ("An Ordinary Evening in New Haven"); "Trace the gold sun about the whitened sky / Without evasion by a single metaphor" ("Credences of Summer")—such lines remind us not only of the centrality of the sun in Stevens' reflections on metaphor, as Joseph Riddel's Derridean investigations have suggested, but also of Stevens' own apparent subscription to the neoclassical and Enlightenment division between "metaphorical" and "proper." This latter split or division in Stevens gives us what Northrop Frye calls this poet's frequently pejorative or negative conception of metaphor—which Frye himself, in his reading of "The Motive for Metaphor," tries, unconvincingly I think, to recuperate, partly because his reading of the poem extracts from it the kind of unidirectional or univocal statement *about* metaphor which the poem itself could be seen, from a different perspective, to make impossible.⁶

This split within Stevens—between "metaphor" and the "proper" or between the evasions of figure and "things as they are"—is joined by a split between negative and positive valuations of metaphor itself: between the deviant trope of "An Ordinary Evening" or the "evading metaphor" of "Add This to Rhetoric" and, on the other hand, the celebration of metaphor as liberating metamorphosis, the rhetorical counterpart of the "accent of deviation in the living thing / That is its life preserved" (in "A Discovery of Thought," whose "far-fetched creature," instrument of renewal, may recall the familiar description of metaphors as "far-fetched," or simply, brought from a distance). Frustratingly for the critic of Stevens, these contradictory pronouncements, when lined up, refuse to speak with one voice. What I would argue is that "The Motive for Metaphor" is both the most complex

and the most frustrating of Stevens' meditations on metaphor precisely because it evokes or provokes such splits or oppositions and, at the same time, fundamentally undermines them, or at least undermines the possibility of a definitive or "proper" reading of their meaning.

Let us turn, then, not so much to a reading of this poem as to an attempt to suggest what complicates *the* reading of it, keeping in mind the foregoing remarks as a kind of elliptical rather than enclosing context for its figures both of movement, or change, and of the sun:

You like it under the trees in autumn,
Because everything is half dead.
The wind moves like a cripple among the leaves
And repeats words without meaning.

In the same way, you were happy in spring,
With the half colors of quarter-things,
The slightly brighter sky, the melting clouds,
The single bird, the obscure moon—

The obscure moon lighting an obscure world
Of things that would never be quite expressed,
Where you yourself were never quite yourself
And did not want nor have to be,

Desiring the exhilarations of changes:
The motive for metaphor, shrinking from
The weight of primary noon,
The A B C of being,

The ruddy temper, the hammer
Of red and blue, the hard sound—
Steel against intimation—the sharp flash,
The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X.

The "motive for metaphor" here seems to involve a movement of evasion, deviation or retreat, a "shrinking from" the shadowless, vertical moment of the sun at noon, and the speaker's preference for the umbral or lunar half-light and for a freedom from fixed naming or identity ("Where you yourself were never quite yourself / And did not want nor have to be") appears to be part of a positive, even exhilarating, "desire." If the "Trace the gold sun about the whitened sky / Without evasion by a single metaphor" in "Credences of Summer" (whose "ruddy summer" may find its echo in "ruddy temper" here) evokes the apocalyptic desire to purge language of its errancy, the evasion or shrinking of "The Motive for Metaphor" seems to place this poem squarely on the other side of the question—on the side of what, in the language of "An Ordinary Evening" and its "Professor

Eucalyptus," might be termed the "*eucalyptic*" rather than the *apocalyptic*,⁷ covering or evasion rather than unveiling and revelation: a glance at the *OED* tells us that "obscure," three times repeated in Stevens' "Motive," means not only "shadowy" and "indistinct" but also "covered" and even "hidden." The poem, at least in its "exhilarations," seems to celebrate the very evasion of or distance from light which both Augustinian and Enlightenment traditions of metaphor, in their different ways, perceive instead in its error and melancholy. Yet the escape which makes metaphor in this reading a principle of levity ("shrinking from the *weight* of primary noon") also, curiously, conveys a sense of melancholia, impotence or weakness. "Shrinking," indeed, as part of this movement or motive of retreat seems to participate in the very creation of an opposition or binary split, as Adam—"the father of Descartes," according to Stevens' "Notes" ("It Must Be Abstract," IV)—shrinks at the Fall from the voice or Spirit of God, retreating or taking cover (in a eucalyptic sense) in the shade or *umbra* of the leaves which distance even as they mediate the Light now shrunk (or fallen) from, one possible resonance within the opening stanza here. The "X" at the end of the poem is "arrogant" and "fatal," but it is also "dominant" and "vital"; and the "shrinking" of metaphor, though part of the "exhilarations of changes," is also suggestive of the more negative connotations of "half dead," "cripple" and "obscure moon."

The figural in the biblical tradition of the *translatio* of temporality and of metaphor has, as we said, customarily been spoken of in just such shadowy or lunar terms: the Fall begins the detour of exile into the *umbra* of figuration and history before the conversion, or re-turning, to Light. But here the motive for metaphor, or the "Figure of Transport," would seem to be transport away from that too bright light—an apotropaic avoidance, or evasion, which would enact one particularly Romantic (or anti-Enlightenment) version of the tradition of *translatio*, westerling or retreat into the umbral. The imagery of this "shrinking" in Stevens' poem is the typical imagery of countless post-Miltonic poems (progeny of *Il Penseroso* and its retreat from the "flaring beams" of "Day's garish eye" into "twilight groves / And shadows brown") which bespeak the impulse to retreat from the noonday sun of a Mammon world of industry, stenolanguage and fixed identities, a tradition which opposes poetic retreat to the objective world of "reality" and links the former with the divagations of the figural. Stevens' oft-repeated term "evasion"—in relation both to metaphor and to the predilections of the poet himself—recapitulates in its ambivalence both the positive and the negative strains in this history of retreat. And "The Motive for Metaphor," I would suggest, allows us to hear in its own evocation of this motive, or motif, of "shrinking" the complex overtones of this poetic history—of the "half knowledge" of Keatsian Negative Capability ("when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason") and its lack of "identity," in contrast to the hard certainties, and resolute end-directedness, of Men of Power, in the pre-ference of the "you" in the poem's first three stanzas for half-light

and for avoidance of direct naming or distinct identity; or of Wordsworthian “intimations” in the last stanza’s “Steel against intimation,” a phrase itself suggestive of the split between objective and subjective, poetic and real that continues to govern so many of Stevens’ own versions of that split. Within this reading of “The Motive for Metaphor” we might ask if the “you” to which the poem is addressed might be, in one of its several possible referents, if not a Romantic poet, then a poet whose predilections may often appear to be “romantic”?

“The Motive for Metaphor” itself may appear to authorize just such a split and to place itself within this history of retreat. “Ruddy temper,” “hammer / Of red and blue,” “Steel,” “sharp flash” all create in the poem’s final stanza the image of a vigorous blacksmith or Man of Industry: we remember that Spenser’s proselytizing, and potentially dominating, Mammon was also an updated version of the classical Hephaistos or Vulcan. And in the context of writings and events roughly contemporary with the date of the poem’s writing (1943), the possibility of retreat from the “hammer” or “steel” of contemporary versions of this Vulcan/Mammon would seem only too readily to lend authority to this reading. The essay “Effects of Analogy,” published in *The Necessary Angel* (with its subtitle *Essays on Reality and the Imagination*) in 1942 speaks of the “ivory tower” of modern poetic retreat (“A poet writes of twilight because he shrinks from noon-day”) but also of “our rowdy gun-men” who hold it in contempt, in terms which might suggest in the “ruddy temper” and “red and blue” of the poem’s final lines a specifically American version of Vulcan, forger of the implements of war; while “Imagination as Value,” in the same collection, speaks of contemporary communism (in a time “dominated by great masses of men”), that Revolution which presents itself as the end of history and change, as the materialist or Mammon successor of earlier, dominant versions of definitive ending (“With the collapse of other beliefs, this grubby faith promises a practicable earthly paradise”). “The Motive for Metaphor,” it might be said, appeared in the same volume as *Esthétique du Mal*, with its picture of Konstantinov, the “lunatic of one idea / In a world of ideas, who would have all the people / Live, work, suffer and die in that idea,” and of Revolution as “the affair of logical lunatics.” In “Imagination as Value,” Stevens observes: “A generation ago we should have said that the imagination is an aspect of the conflict between man and nature. Today we are more likely to say that it is an aspect of the conflict between man and organized society.” As an instrument of shrinking in this particular sense, “it enables us to live our own lives.” It is the perpetual or “irrepressible revolutionist,” evader andunsettler of whatever the current version might be, in the world, of the dominant or “chief image.”⁸

In the most common reading of the poem, the “shrinking” of metaphor is from the poem’s final “dominant X,” generally read as the fixed and unimaginative world of “things as they are,” whatever its local variants. But it also inevitably recalls the “X” who (in the alphabetic schema suggested in the “A B C of being”) is Alpha and Omega, the “noon” of an advent, or

Second Coming, which would be the apocalyptic end of all figures, a change which would end all change and confer an fixed and final Identity. The motive for metaphor which opposes this fixity may recall the exhilarations of the Shelleyan movement ("motive"/*motus*) of metaphor, the continual discovery of "the before unapprehended relations of things." Shelley's exhilarating "West Wind," when recalled in "Notes" ("It Must Change," X), is linked both with the "will to change" and with the "eye of a vagabond in metaphor," in a provocative conflation of the "Ode to the West Wind" with the pronouncements in *A Defence of Poetry* on what Shelley called the "vitaly metaphorical." But the echo of the wind of Shelley's Ode in the opening stanza here—"The wind moves like a cripple among the leaves"—seems an attenuation, at the very least, of that "Wild Spirit," while the "vital" of Shelley's "vitaly metaphorical" is shifted to the "vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X." Metaphor's transport, in "The Motive for Metaphor," may be the promise of continually changing perspectives (a positive conception of metaphor which Shelley did much to found), but it also remains here within the more potentially confining of perspective of *relation*: the metaphor which retreats from the "weight of primary noon" and, in one reading of these final stanzas, from that "vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X," may also in this split or opposition remain, ironically, dominated by that "X," perpetually referring to it in the very movement of retreating from it. Harold Bloom, following Kenneth Burke, speaks of the "perspectivism" of metaphor ("at once the most-praised and most-failing of Western tropes"), its dependence on a dualism of subject and object.⁹ "The Motive for Metaphor" would appear on one reading to operate within—even to set up—this kind of dualistic perspective, one which also accepts and even depends on the distinction between the singularity of the "proper" and the errancy of the "figure." The *translatio* of this "motive for metaphor"—its shrinking or retreat—would still retain the mark of translation as movement and as exile, its deviation or errancy still defined, so to speak, by that "X" which is literally the poem's "end." Read in this way, Stevens' poem bears juxtaposition with one of the senses of what Derrida calls the "*Retrait* of Metaphor": indeed, its combination of exhilaration and melancholy may, even in the compass of a poem no longer than twenty lines, be offering us a canny reading of the very tradition of metaphor-as-exile which Derrida's own investigations continue to pursue.

The reading of "The Motive for Metaphor" in this way would link it with the evasive "motive for metaphor" of one of Stevens' *Adagia*—"Reality is a cliché from which we escape by metaphor." The copular form (A is B) of this and other of the *Adagia* appears to impart to all adages the authority of statement and thus perhaps to authorize a reading of "The Motive for Metaphor" itself as a "poetry of statement" from which such a complete sentence or conclusion might be extracted—a conclusion, suggested wittily perhaps in the progress of the poem itself, which might take the quintessential copular, or propositional, form "The Motive for Metaphor is X." But Stevens, in a way which still needs to be explored, repeatedly sets

in play the very similarity between statement and metaphor, through their sharing of the copula, the frequent appearance in both of the copular “is.” This similarity may explain in part his fascination not only with metaphor but with the simultaneously authoritative and ambiguous form of adages. We tend to read *adagia* as statements and, perhaps in the case of the *Adagia* of Wallace Stevens which mention metaphor, as statements *about* metaphor rather than as metaphorical themselves—a status which would undermine the great split between a statement and its “subject,” or “object”—and even as statements from which, then, other more apparently enigmatic Stevensian texts may be helpfully glossed. In Stevens criticism, this is only too familiar a strategy. But both the copular adages and Stevens’ apparent poetry of statement—including what “The Motive for Metaphor” appears to say *about* metaphor—are frequently subverted by the buried riddles, complex wordplay and dead-pan punning which disrupt the apparent flatness or even sententiousness of statement and undermine such a single, unidirectional syntactic movement towards definitive *sententia* or a teleological sentence or “point.”¹⁰

The copula itself, as Derrida has suggested, introduces an alien element, a complication of copulation in which, as Stevens’ copular “Oak Leaves Are Hands” reminds us, what *is* is “other things” and the “alien” or displaced nature of metaphor both its perpetual movement and its succession of not-quite-proper names or “aliases.” Metaphor and metamorphosis in both that poem’s “Evasive and metamorphoid” and “The Motive for Metaphor” are linked as ways of avoiding or evading capture or closure, though criticism of “The Motive” which attempts to read it as a univocal statement about metaphor must forget this for the sake of its own motives.

It will not have escaped notice, for example, that the whole of the foregoing reading of the “shrinking” of metaphor in this poem, which opposes it to the poem’s final “dominant X” is only one of the possible decisions about its syntax—one which the poem itself sets up but one which can be read as definitive only by ignoring other syntactical possibilities. What makes it finally impossible to extract from “The Motive” any such definitive statement is the unsettling undecidability of its syntax, or movement towards conclusion, though criticism with a particular end in view repeatedly makes such an impossible decision, often without signalling that there is any decision to be made. What is precisely missing from the concluding stanzas is a copula and an authoritative syntactic indication of what is in apposition to what, of where the proper place of each of the series of suspended phrases finally is. Frye and others read “shrinking from / The weight of primary noon” as in apposition to “the motive for metaphor”—a reading which, syntactically, appears clearly justified—but then conclude that “The A B C of being” must, in turn, be in apposition to “primary noon,” and move thence through a series of decisions by the end of which the “motive for metaphor” finally does become “shrinking” from “The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X.” This construing of the syntax would enable a reading of the poem both in Frye’s

terms (where both “the A B C of being” and the “dominant X” are seen as “the objective world”)¹¹ and, quite compatibly, a reading in terms of the tradition of *translatio* in which the “dominant X” might recall the “X” who is the true shadowless Light, the ultimate *dominus* or Master, beyond the evasive detours of the umbral. In each case, metaphor “shrinks” from an “X” which appears to be both telos and threat—whether that telos, in a combination only too familiar in Romantic and post-Romantic poetics, be understood as an apocalyptic end or as an object, or objective.

This syntactic threading would thus read everything from “the A B C of being” to the final “vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X” as in *apposition* to “The weight of primary noon” and thus in *opposition* to “The motive for metaphor.” This might well be what the poem itself sets up as the “dominant” reading, though even here, a poet as skilled in the imagination’s Latin as Stevens might well be doubling the sense of “dominant” as commanding or authoritative with its musical sense (a context also suggested in alternate senses of “temper” and “hammer”), undoing the conclusive sense of “dominant” at the end of the poem’s “sentence” through an echo of a context in which the “dominant” is not final but penultimate, waiting to be resolved or answered to (“Hark—the dominant’s persistence till it must be answered to!”, as Browning doubles it punningly in “A Toccata of Galuppi’s”).

It might indeed be answered to, if we remark the other, divergent possibilities left open by the radical *asyndeton* of these same concluding lines. There is, for example, another syntactic alternative, which would suggest precisely the opposite of this “dominant” reading, one which would see the entire series of appositives, from “A B C of being” to “vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X” as in apposition not to the “weight of primary noon,” as has been predominantly assumed, but rather to the “motive for metaphor” itself. This reading may seem less likely, partly because it would appear to involve too sharp a shift in mood—from the opening “You like it under the trees in autumn, / Because everything is half dead” and its complements in the first three stanzas to “ruddy temper” and something described as “vital” in the final lines. Yet “exhilarations” already effects this shift, and the reading is not precluded by the appositives themselves, whose very lack of definitive dependency leaves suspended the question of their referent. The poem’s pervasive Hephaistos figure is itself curiously split—between the wind “moving like a *cripple* among the leaves” and the vigorous wielder of “the hammer / Of red and blue”: we may remember Frye’s statement in the *Anatomy* that “the thematic poet in the ironic age thinks of himself more as a craftsman than as creator or ‘unacknowledged legislator’ ” when we think of the relation of this poem to its echoes of Shelley’s defence of the “vitally metaphorical” or about the possible reference of the opening “You.” But the lack of definitive syntactical connection in the final lines does make possible the potential transformation of the “cripple” into the more vigorous Hephaistos of the forge at the end—or of a poetry which refuses, finally, the straightforward motive of retreat for

something which might not inaccurately be termed "vital" as well as potentially "arrogant," "fatal," and "dominant." In the two essays already cited from *The Necessary Angel*, Stevens contrasts the Romantic reduction of the power and vigor of the imagination to "minor wish-fulfillments," and a merely "marginal" poetics to a vigorous "central" poetry which would "elicit a sense of the imagination as something vital" and move from the stage of withdrawal or retreat (necessary to the poet "even if his subject happened to be the community and other people, and nothing else") outwards to the creation of something which might contribute to "that ultimate good sense which we term civilization."¹² The figure of Vulcan may provide Spenser with the model for Mammon; but his Virgilian original is a culture-bringer as well as a weapons-maker, forger of the arts of civilized life. Stevens' poem, in its ambivalences as much as in its potentially contradictory syntactical possibilities, may provide a complex reading not of the single, dominant "motive" for metaphor but rather of its unresolutely plural "motives," and motifs, the variations within its poetic history but also within the *va-et-vient* of his own unconcluded meditations.

The "Motive" itself seems to generate opposites or polarities: and from that opposition of terms, a number of moves are possible, including, as always, the projection of a third. Frye's reading in *The Educated Imagination*, indeed, does put forth a plot of compensatory *Aufhebung* for this polarity, and "shrinking," in which the binary opposition of "objective world" and evasive metaphor finds a third term in the identifying of mind and nature through metaphor's copular "is," in which there is no longer any "outside," or Cartesian split. The suggestion of the possibility of such a conversionary motive for metaphor may be built into the poem itself through one of its possible intertextual echoes, of a figure, precisely, of conversion from binary to tertiary, in Browning's *The Ring and the Book*. Browning's figure of poetic creation is not blacksmith but goldsmith, but the craftsman's "hammer" and "tempering" appear in both, as does the implied refusal of a simply retreating poetic. "A B C of being" may well echo Browning's "A B C of fact" (I.708) in the famous analogy of poetic creation to the making of the Ring and, more important, the tripartite process of moving from a potential opposition ("fact" as opposed to "fiction") to a third term beyond both: from fact, through the addition of fiction, to a kind of higher fact. Certainly the question posed in Browning's passage ("Is fiction which makes fact alive, fact too?", 706) might be the motto of Stevens' own meditations on the "reality" of fictions, or of metaphors. The appositions of the last two stanzas of "The Motive for Metaphor" in no way preclude this further, different reading in which the final "X"—like Browning's Ring—might be the *product* of the entire process leading up to the "sharp flash" and in which the syntactic entanglement itself makes it impossible, in the admixture, to say which is the original material and which the "alloy" which would (to paraphrase Browning) finally disappear, having served its mediatory purpose in this conversion, much like metaphor in the tradition Derrida singles out, which bears towards an end before which it is finally

superseded or effaced. Indeed, the plot of *Aufhebung* in which metaphor is, as *translatio*, traditionally cast, involves such a mediatory function, in which its shrinking or retreat from is finally converted into a mediatory bearing towards a more “dominant” end.

Syntax is generally an instrument of hierarchy and subordination as well as of direction, a means of determining what is dominant, or of separating the secondary from the “primary.” But in the suspended phrases of this poem’s final lines—in everything which follows from “primary noon”—it is impossible to privilege any single direction or subordination. Apposition and opposition undo each other here, and if there is, in what we have called the poem’s “dominant” reading, a sense of subordination to or shrinking from an ending, it may be, as Derrida and Richard Klein variously suggest, that ending itself is part of the projections of the figure, that metaphor creates by its very movement the fiction of its own repose.¹³ “Credences of Summer,” published with Stevens’ “Motive” in the same volume (*Transport to Summer*) in 1947, contains lines which look like an end to the movement or errant “evasion” of metaphor: “It is the final mountain. Here the sun, / Sleepless, inhales his proper air, and rests.” “This,” the poem goes on to say, “is the refuge that the end creates.” But the volume in which this “credence” is found still involves, in its very title, the figure of “Transport,” and what is encountered, in “The Motive for Metaphor” at the poem’s ostensible end, is an enigma, rather than an answer to the riddle (“What is the motive for metaphor?”) the poem might lead the reader to expect. This “X” can, again, in a technique only too familiar to Stevens’ critics, be glossed from the various “X’s” of other Stevens poems—the poet “X” of “The Creations of Sound” (described as “an obstruction, a man / Too exactly himself”), the “big X of the returning primitive” in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” the “irreducible X / At the bottom of imagined artifice” from “Someone Puts a Pineapple Together.” But whatever its referent here (or indeed the possibility of marshalling another enigmatic text as gloss), this ostensible end remains a figure of crossing, just as a phrase such as “A B C of being,” unlike perhaps either Browning’s “A B C of fact” or Pound’s “A B C of Reading,” complicates the very sense of a polarity or opposition which the poem may seem, in one reading of the lines in which it appears, to be setting up.

It is possible to oppose “motive for metaphor” to “dominant X,” or syntactically to identify them, or to chart an admixture of “motive for metaphor” and “A B C of being” in which “X” would be the final product, or issue: the syntactical absence or refusal of fixed placement makes possible both the oppositions and the exchange we know as chiasmus (*chi*, X) across the constructed boundaries of such oppositions. The poem’s own generation of polarities sets up characteristic Stevensian splits—including the split between subject and object associated with both Adam and Descartes—but the co-habitation of subjective and objective within the word “motive” itself (which the *OED* reminds us can be both the “object” or end in view and the subjective desire or movement) and the

impossibility of conscripting to a single reading, or statement, of the lines which follow from "the motive for metaphor" may finally be part of a Stevensian *undoing* of such opposition, or copulation, a possibility which would make "The Motive for Metaphor" an important starting point for a rereading of all such oppositions in Stevens and which might reveal a "postmodern criticism" of Stevens—including that which starts from Derrida—already implicit within the slippery non-statements, pseudo-statements and wily copulas, of Stevens' poetry itself.

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Notes

¹Quotations from "La Mythologie blanche," which originally appeared in *Poétique*, 5 (1971), are from F. C. T. Moore, trans., "White Mythology" *New Literary History*, 6, no. 1 (Autumn 1974), pp. 52, 55, 56, 71, 72; the italics in the final quotation are my own. Harold Bloom, in *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977), p. 59, relates Stevens' conception of the First Idea to C. S. Peirce's Idea of Firstness, which locates that idea, as well, in the figure of the heliotrope. For the juxtaposition of the two heliotropes, see Joseph Riddel's "Metaphoric Staging: Stevens' Beginning Again of the 'End of the Book,'" in Frank Doggett and Robert Buttel, eds., *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980), p. 356.

²See *Glas* (Paris: Galilée, 1974), pp. 220ff; *La Carte postale: de Socrate à Freud et au-delà* (Paris: Flammarion, 1980), e.g., p. 16; and "D'un ton apocalyptique adopté naguère en philosophie," in *Les fins de l'homme*, ed. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1981), pp. 445-86, translated as "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy," *Semeia*, 23 (1982), pp. 63-96.

³See p. 29 of Ernst Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. W. Trask (New York: Pantheon, 1953); Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, in the 1899 translation of J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), "Classification of Historic Data," pp. 103-104; and Derrida, "White Mythology," pp. 71-72. For the Greek *metaphora* translated into Latin as *translatio*, see Cicero, *De oratore* III.xxxixff. and Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* VIII.vi.

⁴"Enclitic," 2, no. 2 (Fall 1978). It is worth noting, for those familiar with the critique of "White Mythology" by Paul Ricoeur in the Eighth Study of *The Rule of Metaphor*, trans. R. Czerny (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1977), that this essay contains, in a mode by now familiar, a critique of that critique. I have discussed this "Figure of Transport" at greater length in "The Metaphorical Plot," in David Miall, ed., *Metaphor: Problems and Perspectives* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 133-57.

⁵See the *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, selected and edited by Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1967), p. 792.

⁶See Frye, "The Realistic Oriole: A Study of Wallace Stevens," in *Fables of Identity* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), p. 248; and his reading of "The Motive" in *The Educated Imagination* (Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1963), pp. 10-11.

⁷Derrida plays on the relation of apocalyptic and eucalyptus ("well hidden") in "Apocalyptic Tone," p. 83. For a brilliant reading of the "eucalyptic" strain in "An Ordinary Evening" itself, see Eleanor Cook, "The Ordinary Apocalypse of Wallace Stevens," forthcoming in Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker, eds., *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1984).

⁸See *The Necessary Angel* (New York: Random House, 1942), pp. 121-22, 142-43, 150-52.

⁹*A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 100, 113.

¹⁰The extent of this riddling and deadpan wordplay, and its importance in the reading of Stevens, is provocatively suggested by Eleanor Cook in "Riddles, Charms, and Fictions in Wallace Stevens," in E. Cook et al., *Centre and Labyrinth: Essays in Honour of Northrop Frye* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1983).

¹¹*The Educated Imagination*, p. 10.

¹²*The Necessary Angel*, pp. 115-16, 123, 139. For a highly suggestive account of the split within Romantic conceptions of metaphor (which Stevens, in ways too complex to explore fully here, in part inherits), see David Simpson, *Irony and Authority in Romantic Poetry* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1979), esp. chapter 5.

¹³For the latter, see Richard Klein, "Straight lines and arabesques: metaphors of metaphor," *Yale French Studies*, no. 45 (1970).

Large White Man Reading: Stevens' Genealogy of the Giant

JOSEPH G. KRONICK

Traveling is a fool's paradise. Our journeys discover to us the indifference of places. . . . I affect to be intoxicated with sights and suggestions, but I am not intoxicated. My giant goes with me wherever I go. But the rage of traveling is a symptom of a deeper unsoundness affecting the whole intellectual action. . . . We imitate; and what is imitation but the traveling of the mind?

Emerson, "Self-Reliance"

Nietzsche's allegory of the madman is perhaps the most famous example of a familiar nineteenth-century trope—the death of God. The madman's question, "Whither is God?" presupposes God's death and thereby points to the belatedness of his search. But if he has arrived too late to find what he seeks, his tale is too early, for it falls on deaf ears: " 'I have come too early,' he said then; 'my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men!'"¹ The text points to a curious discrepancy between the event and its narration. While the allegory tells of something that has already taken place, the telling of the allegory reveals that the event is yet to come. A sequential narrative turns out to be an allegory of reading—it "narrates," in Paul de Man's words, "the impossibility of reading."² In order for the listeners to understand, or read, the allegory, they must first experience the story in which they are the main characters. However, the experience itself is cast strictly within language, that is, in the allegory itself. It is not experienced until it is heard, but when it is heard, it is no longer lived experience. Thus the madman's story prevents the very understanding it aims to achieve. And if we turn to the opening, we discover that the madman's allegory is itself an allegory told by a narrator who presupposes his audience, like the madman's, will fail to understand what it is about to hear.

Stories of the death of God are divine histories *par excellence*. Nietzsche's tale acknowledges this by asking, " 'Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us—for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto!'"³ Nietzsche's allegory of reading allegorizes history as the genealogical succession from father to son, thus guaranteeing the conformity between interpretation and history. To exercise the Will to Power, then, is to read, and thereby prove oneself, in Stevens' words, "Master of the world and of himself."⁴

The Nietzschean poet, as envisaged by Stevens, is the giant, the "patron of origins" (p. 443), that is, the reader who inscribes himself as the father, if not as God. While Stevens, in a letter of June 12, 1942, denied Henry

Church's suggestion that his interest in the hero, major man, or the giant was indebted to Nietzsche, his correspondence, as well as his poetry, indicates a lifelong interest in him. Nowhere is this relation more striking than in "Two or Three Ideas." Although Nietzsche's madman asserts that men must become as gods, Stevens rejects this as a less than supreme fiction. The gods, "the clear giants of a vivid time," did not die, nor did they disappear over the horizon; "It is simply that they came to nothing" (*OP* p. 206). The gods' annihilation, writes Stevens, "left us feeling dispossessed and alone in a solitude, like children without parents, in a home that seems deserted. . . . What was most extraordinary is that they left no mementoes behind, no thrones, no mystic rings, no texts either of the soil or of the soul. It was as if they had never inhabited the earth" (*OP*, p. 207). Yet the gods "were not forgotten," for they dwell in the "abodes of the imagination, ancestral or memories of places that never existed" (*OP*, p. 204). As Stevens says in one of his most astonishing lines, "The death of one god is the death of all" (p. 381). The gods now remain where they have always been—in the memory, the home of the imagination. The poet does not imagine a lost past; he remembers an event that others have yet to experience.

The divorce of memory from divine origins frees the text from an inner essence that would make the surface, the words, a shell housing "meaning." With the separation of truth from the house of language, appearance is all that counts. The gods, like poets, are a style; in fact, style and gods are one, as are "the style of a poem and the poem itself." Stevens concludes, "the poets who have little or nothing to say are, or will be, the poets that matter" (*OP*, p. 204). While some may read this as a Wildean art for art's sake dictum, I would suggest a Nietzschean reading—that poetry is most profound that is most superficial: "It is a world of words to the end of it,/ In which nothing solid is its solid self" (p. 345). For the poet, as Derrida claims for the Nietzschean philosopher, history begins when he is exiled from truth.⁵

Let us return to Nietzsche's allegory. Man enters history after he has killed God—that is, when he no longer believes that truth inheres within the surface of things. In "Description without Place," a poem with close affinities to Nietzsche, the poet declares, "It is possible that to seem—it is to be" (p. 339). And it is Nietzsche who for Stevens is the master of seeming:

Nietzsche in Basel studied the deep pool
Of these discolorations, mastering

The moving and the moving of their forms
In a much-mottled motion of blank time.

His reverie was the deepness of the pool,
The very pool, his thoughts the colored forms,

The eccentric souvenirs of human shapes,
Wrapped in their seemings, crowd on curious crowd . . .

(p. 342)

To master form is to reject depth, and with it, the inside/outside dichotomy of the symbol. Here reverie becomes perception as Nietzsche's thoughts fill the "blank time," memories of homes abandoned by the gods, with the mementoes of man. To interpret history is to anthropomorphize the Other, whether this Other be nature or the past. And if, as Stevens writes elsewhere, "The sense creates the pose" (p. 199), then perception is figuration, a troping of nature's elemental blank.

In "Phosphor Reading by His Own Light," Stevens calls this the eye that fills the blank of the page:

It is difficult to read. The page is dark.
Yet he knows what it is that he expects.

The page is blank or a frame without a glass
Or a glass that is empty when he looks.

The greenness of night lies on the page and goes
Down deeply in the empty glass . . .

(p. 267)

Phosphor represents a much different type of reader from Nietzsche precisely because he peers into the glass as if it were a portal to see beyond the surface and into the depths to discover what he already knows and calls nature. Stevens, however, instructs him:

Look, realist, not knowing what you expect.
The green falls on you as you look,

Falls on and makes and gives, even a speech.
And you think that that is what you expect,

That elemental parent, the green night,
Teaching a fusky alphabet.

(p. 267)

The realist believes in nature, "the elemental parent," as that which guarantees the descent of meaning and language, and, thus, expects to find the voice of the author, or truth, in a text. The green night contrasts with "The sun of Nietzsche gilding the pool," for the former hands down a "fusky alphabet," words darkened by convention, while the latter revolves in the "perpetual revolution" of seeming.

The trick, writes Stevens to José Rodriguez Feo, is to “read poetry at the finger tips. . . . Most people read it listening for echoes because the echoes are familiar to them. They wade through it the way a boy wades through water, feeling with his toes for the bottom: the echoes are the bottom” (*L*, p. 575). We must learn to read a little blindly, to close our eyes to the sun in order to “see it clearly in the idea of it” (p. 380). Rather than reach down to touch the “muddy centre,” we must seek “The essential poem at the centre of things” (p. 440). This search, paradoxically, takes us to the surface where sits “A giant, on the horizon, glistening” (p. 442).

In the Stevensian world, where the word “God” has been changed to “man,” the giant holds a prominent, if not central, place. In canto VII of “It Must Be Abstract,” the giant is “A thinker of the first idea.” The first idea suggests the poet’s desire to escape his belatedness and return to “that ever-early candor” an earliness in which he asserts his dominion over language. The first idea, as canto I of “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” implies, demands a simultaneous act of perception and naming. To see “this invented world” (p. 380) is to rename it, and naming for Stevens requires a reciprocal act of willful forgetting. In other words, an allegory emerges wherein the essence of a thing, its idea, is reinvented in words. The first idea, therefore, is “An abstraction blooded,” a bridging of being and seeing. Language, above all, the metaphorical language of poetry, is traditionally held up as that which leads from appearance to essence. In Stevens, this movement is variously staged in a genetic pattern of descent from father to son—with its subsequent reversal—or as the descent of the giant, whereby the text asserts a conformity between origin and end. Rather than rely on the metaphorical pattern of substitution, Stevens’ familial trope operates according to the metonymic properties of combination and displacement. Thus, the bridge that spans being and seeing is constructed from language, and when Stevens announces the “project for the sun,” he reveals that being and seeing are tropes:

There is a project for the sun. The sun
Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be
In the difficulty of what it is to be.

(p. 381)

To perceive “The inconceivable idea of the sun” is to see it with an “ignorant eye,” that is, an eye freed from the common sense understanding that links truth to an object through a process of agreement or concordance or adequation. In Stevens’ project of Being, truth is not maintained in a relation between mind and object. Rather, “truth” already exists in and as language; hence the lapse into the trope “gold flourisher” declares that “truth” does not operate through a process of nominalization but is itself a trope, a turning away from the sun. Unlike flowers, language is not heliotropic.

For Stevens, the origin is typically the parent, the giant, or the first idea. Yet when he writes, "The first idea was not our own. Adam/ In Eden was the father of Descartes," he separates the first idea from natural or supernatural origins; the source is already doubled against itself as Cartesian dualism alienates man from nature. The interpretative act seeks a conformity between the text and its origins; however, reading reveals the origin to be a metonymic reduction of history to genealogy. Metonymy translates history into a familial pattern. Yet Stevens consistently places the scene of this family drama in deserted homes, and thus denies the ground of this genealogical trope. Poetry begins in a home deserted by the parents:

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.

(p. 383)

Left in a world without gods, man is no longer the "delinquent," yet he has not taken the place of the gods either. Instead, he can, in Emerson's metaphor of the MacDonald, only take his place at the head of the table. I refer, of course, to the MacCullough, the major man of "Notes."

The giant of "Notes" first appears in canto VI of "It Must Be Abstract," where the reduction to the first idea brings us back to winter, "Without a name and nothing to be desired,/ If only imagined but imagined well." But Stevens' weather, unlike Franz Hals', is not the weather of a people who are at home in this world:

The weather and the giant of the weather,
Say the weather, the mere weather, the mere air:
An abstraction blooded, as a man by thought.

(p. 385)

The reduction to the first idea is the descent of winter to "an elemental freedom, sharp and cold" (p. 297). The weather, Bloom comments, is "for Stevens the prime *materia poetica*."⁶ But the weather does not provide a ground for poetry; Stevens does not present us with a phenomenalist in which perception takes us to the essence of experience. The giant is, after all, a man of winter and, thus, a "listener, who listens in the snow,/ And nothing himself, beholds/ Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (p. 10).

To replace the parent at the head of the past, the poet must imagine himself as the giant—or imagine what the weather would be like without a giant:

It feels good as it is without the giant,
A thinker of the first idea. Perhaps
The truth depends on a walk around a lake,

A composing as the body tires . . .

(p. 386)

The suggestion of natural immediacy, a oneness with nature, springs from our liberation from a history imposed upon us by the giant. But when we awaken from the dream of the whole poem, we "behold/ The academies like structures in a mist" (p. 386). The academies house the abstraction major man, that is, the figure of humanism; but we are in no position to look down upon our "unique and solitary home" (p. 512). Rather, our vision has been doubled, obscured in the very awakening that removes us from the first idea. Hence, Stevens asks,

Can we compose a castle-fortress-home,
Even with the help of Viollet-le-Duc,
And set the MacCullough there as major man?

The first idea is an imagined thing.
The pensive giant prone in violet space
May be the MacCullough, an expedient,

Logos and logic, crystal hypothesis,
Incipit and a form to speak the word
And every latent double in the word,

Beau linguist. But the MacCullough is MacCullough.
It does not follow that major man is man.
If MacCullough himself lay lounging by the sea,

Drowned in its washes, reading in the sound,
About the thinker of the first idea,
He might take habit, whether from wave or phrase,

Or power of the wave, or deepened speech,
Or a leaner being, moving in on him,
Of greater aptitude and apprehension,

As if the waves at last were never broken,
As if the language suddenly, with ease,
Said things it had laboriously spoken.

(pp. 386-87)

To compose the home is to restore the monuments of the past. Stevens, as did Henry Adams before him, enlists the aid of Viollet-le-Duc as an architectural historian and refurbisher of fronts to medieval remains. But to reconstruct does not take us to the first idea; refurbishing is not reduction. Rather than strip away language to a fecund minimum, the poet recognizes

that the first idea can only be imagined, and this means it can only be recovered through interpretation, or reading, to be more precise, for the MacCullough reproduces that “original” error wherein reason and the Word, logic and logos, are one, thus distancing man from the primacy of being. The beginning does not lie in the Word but in words, in the “incipit,” the textual marker that introduces a poem or treatise in a medieval manuscript or an early printed book. The incipit, thus, is the inscription, the writing, that precedes speech. The MacCullough, the “beau linguist,” must become the capable reader who speaks the “latent double in the word,” the figure that marks every beginning as divided against itself and thus opens language for the belated poet. But the origin does not remain open—the “MacCullough is MacCullough”; he is not Walt Whitman “lounging by the sea” and “reading in the sound” a language concealed in nature, only to be heard if there could be a return to a time before history and/or language, a time when the waves “were never broken.”

To speak the “latent double in the word,” logos and logic, is not to restore, after Heidegger, the proper relation between being and thinking, yet it does require a return to a form of the word that can be heard above “reason’s click-clack” (p. 387). And this word does not lead us to a restored union of logos and *physis*: it is to evolve a giant, to “Trace the gold sun about the whitened sky/ Without evasion by a single metaphor.” Metaphor, as Aristotle defined it for posterity, “consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else” (*Poetics*, 1457b6-9). The “logic of metaphor,” to use Hart Crane’s phrase, is that it makes manifest what in itself is hidden from the sense or understanding. Thus, as Derrida argues so convincingly in “White Mythology,” “the theory of metaphor remains a theory of *sense* and supposes a certain originating naturalness in this figure.” This originating figure in Western thought is the sun. To trace this course of the sun is, therefore, to trace the course of metaphor itself; it is to retrace the genetic line from appearance to essence or, in linguistic terms, from the figurative to the proper. As the sun, the paradigm of what is sensible, is never seen but in its color, its “bull fire” or gold flourishings, and even then is seen obliquely, it is already a metaphor. As Derrida says of the sun, “it regularly turns (itself) and hides (itself).” This movement of the sun, the tracing of the path of figuration, is the reduction to the first idea. De Man has called the genetic model for metaphor a “blind metonymy.”⁷ And metonymy, as Kenneth Burke argues in “Four Master Tropes,” can itself be renamed “reduction.”

A metonymic reading of Stevens would reveal that the genealogical metaphors dominating his poetry are not evidence of a psychic struggle with the past, but are a displacing of the genetic link between the figural and proper meaning of language—I would even suggest that this would open his terms “imagination” and “reality” to a rereading that would separate him from both romanticism and phenomenology. In rhetorical terms, the reduction to the first idea becomes, not an approach to the thing itself, but a denial of the temporal succession that ties language to the phenomenal world.

The genetic succession implied by mimetic or expressive theories of literature depends upon the coincidence of the figural with the proper. The truth value of metaphorical language is guaranteed by a proper meaning from which the metaphor descends. But the reduction to the first idea is not a tracing of the steps that lead one back to origins. The first idea, in one of Stevens' favorite metaphors, always takes us back to the weather, a residue of figuration that cannot be erased: "The wind moves like a cripple among the leaves/ And repeats words without meaning" (p. 288).

Along with the tale of the MacCullough, one of the most striking instances of the reduction to the first idea appears in canto I of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." Again Stevens identifies the thinker of the first idea as the giant:

The eye's plain version is a thing apart,
The vulgate of experience. Of this,
A few words, an and yet, and yet, and yet—

As part of the never-ending meditation,
Part of the question that is a giant himself:
Of what is this house composed if not of the sun,

These houses, these difficult objects, dilapidate
Appearances of what appearances,
Words, lines, not meanings, not communications,

Dark things without a double, after all,
Unless a second giant kills the first—
A recent imagining of reality,

Much like a new resemblance of the sun,
Down-pouring, up-springing and inevitable,
A larger poem for a larger audience,

As if the crude collops came together as one,
A mythological form, a festival sphere,
A great bosom, beard and being, alive with age.

(pp. 465-66)

Perception and experience fail to meet in New Haven, for they are lost in a translation, the vulgate, the common version of a text; hence the "few words" on "The eye's plain version" are forever postponed. The giant emerges out of this deferral to occupy a house composed of the sun—a figure inhabiting the figure of figuration itself. In a return to the myth of major man as "beau linguist," Stevens retells the divine history of the struggle between father and son; the "latent double" in the word can only be uttered by a "second giant," a reader who reimagines the world, that is,

hears the echo that is a giant's question, for the question itself remains unheard, even unspoken, unless it can be uttered in an answer that is its double. Stevens casts the struggle within genealogical terms in which the double stands for the figuration that generates meaning to produce "a new resemblance of the sun." Set within the myth of familial struggle, the production of poetry as a doubling of an original speech undoes metaphor's dependence upon proper meaning, for there can be no poetry of a first giant, an originary being who exists outside language.

The first giant is the author of "The essential poem at the centre of things" (p. 440). But like the essential poem, the giant can only be known by lesser beings, that is, by ephebes. "A Primitive Like an Orb" provides my penultimate example of Stevens' genealogy of the giant. The essential poem lies beyond the senses in "the obscurest as, the distant was . . ." (p. 441). It lies, in other words, beyond the resemblance and identity, outside the reach of mimesis—simile (as) and copula (was). The beyond lies in trope, in the *différence* wherein "it is and it/ Is not and, therefore, is" (p. 440). The senses cannot seize the beyond except insofar as it, the beyond, is already figural, a doubling of metaphor, that which allows us to think the beyond. And mimesis is itself a trope, even a doubling of metaphor whereby the sun evades the eye. The essential poem, consequently, is a rumor heard in lesser poems; it is "a poem of/ The whole," a poem about and never the whole itself.

Stevens calls this poem of the whole "A giant, on the horizon" (p. 442), a point of vision where being is held in perpetual abeyance; it is where the "giant of nothingness" lives: "a close, parental magnitude,/ At the centre in the horizon, concentrum, grave/ And prodigious person, patron of origins" (p. 443). The giant is change itself. "Origins," as Stevens here uses the term, is totally stripped of its metaphysical connotations and becomes an "abstraction blooded," a figure of speech traced to its figurative beginnings.

The giant, then, is he who satisfies man's cravings for reality, the desire to touch the muddy centre. He is, finally, the poet as reader:

There were ghosts that returned to earth to hear
his phrases,
As he sat there reading, aloud, the great blue tabulae.
They were those from the wilderness of stars that had
expected more.

There were those that returned to hear him read from
the poem of life,
Of the pans above the stove, the pots on the table,
the tulips among them.
They were those that would have wept to step barefoot
into reality . . .

(p. 423)

The ghostly presences return from Stevens' own past, specifically, from such poems as "The Reader" and "Phosphor Reading by His Own Light." The echoes Stevens provides come not from his poetic fathers, but from his own poems. He here asserts that he once declared in one of his letters: "While, of course, I come down from the past, the past is my own and not something marked Coleridge, Wordsworth, etc." (*L*, p. 792). The poet wishes to make the past his own by reading

The outlines of being and its expressings, the syllables
of its law:

Poesis, poesis, the literal characters, the vatic
lines,

Which in those ears and in those thin, those spended
hearts,

Took on color, took on shape and the size of things
as they are

And spoke the feeling for them, which was what they
had lacked.

(p. 424)

In the ears of the listeners, the ghostly presences, the reader's words take on "color" and "the size of things as they are." In these vatic lines are heard the echoes of the poet's past, the echoes that will satisfy those readers who desire to touch the muddy centre, to hear in the everyday the "poem of life," a confirmation of being. But the poet is a large red man reading; he satisfies the desire for the first idea, a giant who is his own parent, an echo of himself sounding in the ears of ghostly listeners. The giant is "an artificial thing . . . Yet not too closely the double of our lives,/ Intenser than any life could be,/ A text we should be born that we might read" (p. 344). "Large Red Man Reading" is an allegory of our desire to hear in a poem the echo of the logos, "a parental space." In the parodic self-allusions of the poem, Stevens allegorizes the genetic pattern of literary history as a tale of readers and listeners rather than poets and precursors.

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Notes

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 181.

² Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 77.

³ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 181.

⁴ Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), p. 102. Hereafter cited in text as OP. All quotations from Stevens' poetry are from *The Collected Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954) and will be cited by page number. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966) will be cited in the text as L.

⁵ See Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 87.

⁶ Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 186.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," trans. F. C. T. Moore, *New Literary History*, 6 (1974), 32, 53; de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, p. 102.

Stevens' Boundaries

MICHAEL BEEHLER

"How then shall the mind be less than free
Since only to know is to be free?"

Wallace Stevens

This question from Stevens' 1953 poem, "The Sail of Ulysses," rhetorically closes one of Ulysses' recited meditations upon knowledge, an argument which concludes with the assertion of the unconstrained freedom of the poet's powerfully creative mind. Ulysses argues that, since

"man's sons
And heirs are powers of the mind,
His only testament and estate,"

and that therefore "'He has nothing but the truth to leave,' " how, finally, can the mind be thought of as "'less than free/ Since only to know is to be free?'" (OP 103). The assumption behind this argument is the one commonly associated with Stevens' writings: if poetry is the act of the mind pushing back against the pressures of an alien and hostile reality with the freely imagined fictions of its desire—fictions in which, however, the self-conscious poet can only "believe without belief, beyond belief" (CP 336)—then knowledge is indeed a sign of the mind's freedom to invent these fictitious but gratifying objects of knowledge. It would follow, then, that Stevens must be, as Frank Lentricchia has dubbed him, "the culmination and summary representative of . . . the conservative fictionalist tradition in modern poetics and philosophy."¹ Self-consciously knowing that what it believes in is never other than a product of its own imaginings, the poet's mind, for Ulysses and, apparently, for Stevens, cannot be "'less than free.' "

But the status of knowledge and freedom is more problematic than Ulysses makes it out to be, and it is this problem—one that concerns the boundaries or limiting horizons of poetic language—that is left unsaid in his rhetorical question. According to Lentricchia, the poetics of conservative fictionalism explains poetic language as a type of *via negativa*. Although it always fails to master the grim reality for which its fictive worlds provide reassuring substitutes, and although these fictions are self-consciously recognized by the poet as having no ontological validity, poetic language nevertheless ends up telling us something "true" about reality and fiction: namely, that fictions are simply part of a "world of words" that at no point makes unmediated contact with an ontologically privileged "reality." In other words, by self-consciously disclosing its failure to bridge the perceived gap between word and thing, poetic language appears to succeed both in revealing the innocent truth about word and thing and in

guaranteeing to its writer the freedom to invent, without external constraint, the fictions he desires.

What goes unsaid in the poetics of conservative fictionalism is its reliance upon a certain logic of horizons, and the belief that the poet—or the critic—can neutralize the boundaries of poetic language and metaphor simply by rigorously and self-consciously determining them. To put it in Ulysses' terms, the "truth" man leaves behind him—his "'only testament and estate'"—springs solely from the "'powers of the mind'" as it "'renews the world in a verse'" (*OP* 103) that, as Lentricchia reads Stevens, the poet knows to be a fiction. For such a poet—and I will argue that Stevens cannot so facilely be reduced to his "summary representative"—what is ultimately privileged as the unquestioned sign of truth always appears as the horizon that separates the poetic language he knows to be endlessly fictive from the reality—always said to lie outside the binding horizon of that language—he can affirm but never know with any unmediated certainty. Consequently, the fictionalist's assertion that poetic language has no referential center beyond itself—that it freely reflects nothing other than its own groundless fictions—can be made only under the constraining influence of a logic of division and exclusion: only within, that is, a structure of reason supported by the unquestioned figure of the horizon.

The argument of Stevens' 1937 essay, "The Irrational Element in Poetry," repeats this patterning logic of the horizon. In this essay, Stevens meditates upon the apparently fallen nature of poetic language and the *via negativa* by which the recognition of the fictiveness of words seems to disclose a truth beyond the horizons of fiction: to reveal, that is, a truly transcendent presence the essay names equally the "irrational" and the "unknown." It is, in other words, the citation of the binding horizon to poetic language that allows the transcendence of the irrational and the unknown to be recognized. Here, apparently, is a clear indication of Stevens' conservative fictionalism—in which an absence marked in language can be taken to be the sign of a presence that can be spoken of only as other and elsewhere. And yet, the horizon of poetic language, as Stevens brings it into play in this essay, is a strangely folded one that, while on the one hand marking the boundary beyond which the fictions of language cannot go, on the other positions itself within that very horizon. The argument of the essay, which relies upon the logic of the binding horizon, repeats that logic as a problem in which the horizon of metaphor turns up not simply as the privileged sign of truth—the unquestioned margin that separates the fictive "known" from the true "unknown"—but also as a sign of metaphor. In this essay—and throughout Stevens—the horizon of metaphor discloses the metaphoricity of horizons.

After some introductory remarks, the essay opens with an anecdote: the story of a snowy Thanksgiving in Hartford and of the poet, lying in bed, hearing "the steps of a cat running over the snow under [his] window almost inaudibly" This sound becomes for Stevens a figure of all "pretexts for poetry," of all sources for poetic language which, the essay later ex-

plains, the poet “grows completely tired of” in an exhaustion that drives him towards a desired “subject” (*OP* 221). The anecdote of the poetic “pretext” begins to define the irrational as a “transaction between reality and the sensibility of the poet” that Stevens describes as the origin “from which poetry springs” (*OP* 217). The form of this “transaction,” it must be noted, repeats the logic of the horizon by positing a reality rigorously separated and bounded off from the sensibility of the poet, and by affirming the ability of poetic language to somehow cross that abysmal boundary.

The irrational Stevens refers to in the essay also arises from within this logic, for it appears as something wholly other to which the essay’s language can only negatively refer. It lies, for example, beyond the boundaries of the proper name. As Stevens writes late in the essay, “I use the word irrational more or less indifferently, as between its several senses” (*OP* 229), since any single “sense” shows itself to be only an untrue metaphor of the irrational that, the essay has told us, can have no proper sensual image. Stevens here evades a definition of the irrational by multiplying its various “senses,” a strategy he uses again in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” where he shows nobility “unfixed,” because “if it is defined, it will be fixed and it must not be fixed. . . . To fix it is to put an end to it.” Like nobility, the irrational appears as that which lies beyond the horizon of language as a presence that language can indicate only by describing its own limitations; only, that is, by following a *vía negativa* of self-deprecation.

Not to follow this road—not, that is, to self-consciously assert the fallen and restricted nature of language—results in a subreption that reduces the constant otherness of the irrational by rendering it a representable object within the horizon of writing. At one point in the essay Stevens refers to Freud as “one of the great figures in the world” that has arisen since the poet’s earlier Harvard years, and notes that “while he is responsible for very little in poetry . . . he has given the irrational a legitimacy that it never had before,” presumably by writing a discourse that accurately describes the irrational and not simply its own inadequate fictionality (*OP* 218-19). This passive allusion to Freud and his book of the irrational turns hostile, however, five years later in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” in which Stevens equates Freud with Descartes as two of a “great many people” who have “cut poetry’s throat” (*NA* 14). It is the murderous subreption of Freud’s discourse that Stevens attacks, for since the irrational is, according to Stevens, that which can never be properly named—and thus appears only as that which cannot be brought within the horizon of words—it is clear that its determination in any discourse must be a delusion akin to what Kant, using a similar logic with respect to the sublime, calls fanaticism. On the other hand, Stevens’ fluctuating and unfixed “definition” of the irrational appears to avoid this self-delusion by maintaining the irrational as the inexplicable and finally indescribable center of his essay. This definition that refuses to define is a self-conscious gesture that, by marking the illusory status of discourse, seeks to insure the exclusion of the irrational from writing and thus its protection from the

contamination of writing's fictions. It reinscribes a separating boundary that distinguishes the rational and the known from the irrational and the unknown. The delineation of this boundary is a strategy necessary to the *via negativa* of conservative fictionalism, for it is only by reference to it that writing can mark itself as fiction and, at the same time, gesture towards an irrational but uncontaminated transcendence beyond itself. The binding horizon of language must be made to appear before the absence that Stevens self-consciously reveals in his language can be interpreted as the sign of a presence that cannot be accurately manifested within that horizon.

And yet it is the privileged status of this determining boundary that the essay finally calls into question. As the title of the essay reminds us, the "irrational" is a force that is never really *other*, since it is an irrational element *in* poetry, the name of a "particular process in the rational mind which we recognize as irrational in the sense that it takes place unaccountably" (OP 218). The "irrational" that the essay has continually placed beyond the horizon of words and writing also, it now appears, has a place within that very horizon. The process is unaccountable, then, not because it refers us to a transcendent other the essay mutely gestures towards through the *via negativa* of conservative fictionalism. Rather, by refusing to take place simply inside poetic language or simply outside of it, the irrational appears as a process that erases the boundary between inside and outside by allowing it to be written only as a metaphor of a boundary. For Stevens, the logic of the horizon—the only structural conditions within which an uncontaminated outside to language can be thought—is already a poetic figure, an "unwritten rhetoric that is always changing and to which the poet must always be turning" (OP 226). The horizon of language, then, becomes folded, appearing as the mark of the end of poetic language that simultaneously declares its return. The essay therefore first images the horizon as a "transaction," a term that for Stevens' legal mind carries the overtones of a document in writing. Indeed, the figure of the irrational, privileged on the one hand as a transcendent pretext for poetry, on the other is said to emerge only within the constraining forces of a problematic textual history, for "there is . . . a history of the irrational element in poetry, which is . . . merely a chapter of the history of the irrational in the arts generally" (OP 218).

The sense of the horizon or boundary as a metaphor within the discourse of poetry—or, in Stevens' phrase, "as part of the dynamics of poetry" (OP 227)—is crucial to the final section of "The Irrational Element in Poetry," which opens with a substitution of terms: "The irrational bears the same relation to the rational that the unknown bears to the known" (OP 227). What follows is an intricate description of the dynamics of the known which Stevens equates to the dynamics of poetry: "I do not for a moment mean to indulge in mystical rhetoric, since for my part, I have no patience with that sort of thing. That the unknown as the source of knowledge, as the object of thought, is part of the dynamics of the known does not permit

denial” (OP 228). The dynamics of the known simply repeats the logic of the horizon: two terms—the known and the unknown—are distinguished by a differentiating boundary that separates them, and it is the citing of this boundary that allows the unknown to be seen as that which lies over the horizon of the known. It is the boundary, then, that first produces the figure of the other or unknown that can then be taken to be the “source of knowledge,” but this boundary can never be seen as strictly natural and innocent, since it is imposed by the “dynamics of the known” whose coercive force Stevens here describes as undeniable. To write or to think is to repeat this forestructuring dynamics without which we can neither think nor write. As Stevens later observes, “We accept the unknown”—and thus the dynamics which produces it as a sign of transcendence—“even when we are most skeptical” (OP 228). It is thus only through the mediation of another metaphor—that of the boundary or horizon—and the constraining dynamics of which it is a part, that a transcendent pretext for poetic language—call it the unknown, the irrational, or whatever—is unavoidably rewritten in that language.

Through the same process, “god,” in one of Stevens’ adagia, can be made to appear as “reality”: “There is no such thing as a metaphor of a metaphor. One does not progress through metaphors. Thus reality is the indispensable element of each metaphor. When I say that man is a god it is very easy to see that if I say god is something else, god has become reality” (OP 179). “Reality”—Stevens’ name for that which must not be thought of as metaphoric—is therefore the inevitable production of this passage from one metaphor into another. It is indispensable not because it is an ontologically privileged, referential center for the fictions of poetic language, but because it is the effect produced by the circulation of those fictions. Without this effect, and the distinguishing boundary between the metaphoric and the non-metaphoric it relies on, poetic language—and all language—would collapse to an undifferentiated meaninglessness. The horizon of poetic language, therefore, *cannot fail to be thought and written*—even if what is then affirmed to lie over that horizon in some literal reality is marked only by disclosing an absence within metaphor itself. What this adagia entry shows us, however, is that the inevitable and indispensable appearance of such a “reality” is never innocent, but is the return of the purely structural center necessary to any linguistic construction.

“The Irrational Element in Poetry,” then, launches a critique upon those who, like Freud, Stevens calls the “charlatans of the irrational” (OP 228): those who fail to self-consciously recognize that the fictions their language produces are fictions, and that the boundary between poetic metaphor and ontological truth is the supreme fiction that allows for the production of linguistic significance. But it is at this point that we must recall both Lentricchia and Ulysses and ask: since Stevens’ writing shows a self-conscious awareness of the metaphoricity of any boundary whose limits would enclose poetic metaphor and thereby protect a literal truth—which can itself be nothing other than a metaphor anyway—doesn’t this self-

conscious awareness, in the best tradition of conservative fictionalism, finally attain the status of an innocent, unstructured truth? And doesn't this attained truth finally free his writing from all constraints, since all such constraints can only be fictitious acts of the mind anyway? We remember Ulysses' conclusion that, because the mind knows only its own creations, it is free of all constraints, since " 'only to know is to be free,' " but we also recall that this observation was made only under some very pervasive and apparent restrictions: only, that is, between the quotation marks that disclose Ulysses' assertion of freedom as a recitation bound by an unneutralized textuality only in which the speaker can read "*his own mind*" (OP 99). In spite of Ulysses' assertion, his language reveals that the "'powers of the mind'" are subject to certain inescapable, textual constraints. Although he continues to look forward to

"the day on which the last star
Has been counted, the genealogy
Of gods and men destroyed"

—the day, that is, on which " 'we shall have gone behind the symbols / To that which they symbolize'" —that day nevertheless marks the repetition of a constraining genealogy that cannot be circumvented:

"The mind renews the world in a verse,
A passage of music, a paragraph
By the right philosopher: renews
And possesses by insight
In the John-begat-Jacob of what we know."

(OP 103)

This genealogy of fathers and sons, creators and createds, origins and derivatives, ultimately forestructures each insight of " 'what we know'" and discloses the so-called " 'free'" creations of thought and language to be repetitions bound by an unavoidable—and distinctly logocentric—rhetoric.

These structural and unneutralizable constraints are apparent throughout Stevens' canon, but they are demonstrated no more surprisingly than in a poem from *Transport to Summer* whose title seems to assert the dominance of a freely-constructing imagination. The poem, called "Human Arrangement," finally reveals the bound status of the "arrangement"—the structural organization or "edifice"—in which "being," "will," and "fate" are first "forced up from nothing" (CP 363). This is no human arrangement—no product of a willing being that, it turns out, is itself a product of the arrangement—but is rather the repetition of a construction whose structure is inevitably constrained by a "Rain without change within or from/ Without." Its appearance is thus not a free act of the mind, but is rather

Place-bound and time-bound in evening rain
And bound by a sound which does not change,

Except that it begins and ends,
Begins and ends again

in a reiterative eternal return of a same whose history is not subject to the human arrangement of the poet. This constraining and unchanging sound is characterized, in "Large Red Man Reading" (CP 423-24), as an unneutralizable textuality whose pervasiveness recalls the unavoidably logocentric rhetoric of "The Sail of Ulysses." In this earlier poem, it is only within the confines of a text—between the constraining covers of the "purple tabulae" the large red man reads—that are traced the "outlines of being and its expressings, the syllables of its law"—the "vatic lines" of "*Poesis, poesis.*" Like Ulysses, whose mind is a text that discloses the recitative character of his supposedly free and original speech, the large red man reading turns out to be a textual effect.

An unconstrained, unforestructured, and innocently true writing—the dream of the conservative fictionalist—is what Stevens' writing demonstrates as that which can never be written. Since the true and the meaningful arise only within the horizon of an unavoidably logocentric textuality, innocent, unstructured truth can only represent the meaningless and the unthinkable. What "we shall [always] be needing," as "Things of August" tells us, is "A new text of the world" in which, for once, "The meanings are our own" (CP 494-95): an innocent writing whose significance

comes from ourselves . . .
. . . free from question,
Because we wanted it so,

because *we* will meaning to be present there. But such a text, the poem goes on to say, "had to be," and therefore cannot be, since its appearance is a sign of its coercively constrained production and of its status as another old text whose meanings are distinctly *not* our own. The recitation of this old text, and therefore the reinstitution of its foreordained meanings, is, however—like the inevitable drawing of the boundary between the fictive and the true, the metaphoric and the literal—necessary for us to think since, the poem concludes, thinking occurs only by "writing and reading the rigid inscription." The purely textual and forestructured nature of truth, significance, and meaning can, as Stevens' writings demonstrate, never be neutralized.

Thus "We keep coming back and coming back," as "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" tells us, "To the real" (CP 471), one of Stevens' most privileged names for unstructured, simple truth. Constrained by an inescapable textuality in which truth and meaning can only occur as repetitions of the structuring, logocentric logic of the horizon—the logic of inside

and outside, of division and exclusion—we come back because there is no sense in doing otherwise. Simply because Stevens' writing repeatedly points out that to go "straight . . . to the object/ At the exactest point at which it is itself" is always, unavoidably, to go "straight to the word," does not free his language to speak an innocently unstructured truth. "New Haven's" tenth canto attacks the "man/ Of bronze whose mind was made up and who, therefore, died" (CP 472): the man who lives in the fatal and empty moon of the "spirit's alchemicana" and can, in his delusion, distinguish between the real and the fictive. His death, the poem asserts, is a consequence of his belief in the truth of this distinction which we, the speaker proudly notes, know to be only a fiction, for "We do not know what is real and what is not." Self-consciously recognizing the metaphoricity of the boundaries drawn by the man of bronze, the poet writes, "We are not men of bronze and we are not dead . . . His spirit is imprisoned . . . ours is not," since, by citing the "enigmatical/ Beauty of each beautiful enigma"—by self-consciously not making up our minds—we express the "faithfulness of reality." But the attack itself repeats the logic of the horizon and demonstrates that the critic's mind is no less made up than the bronze man's: no less structured, that is, by a heliotropic "mode" and "tendance" that is dragged along by its own supposedly innocent rhetoric. As Canto XIX puts it, the moon is a center that determines for "each thing" its proper position and significance, its "radial aspect," within a particular structure, and although one can critique this radially centered structure, as Canto X does, one does so only by repeating it, for "At another time, the radial aspect came/ From a different source. But there was always one." It makes no sense to critique the structure from an unstructured position, since there is never such a position affirmed in Stevens, for, as Canto XVIII has it, the true appears only within the forestructuring constraints of a perspective-determining "window" (CP 478).

Stevens' writing, then, while it works from within the poetics of conservative fictionalism, nevertheless repeats those poetics—and their assumption that language can finally disclose an innocently unconstrained truth about itself—as a problem. It cannot move outside its forestructuring constraints—which I have only briefly described as the rhetoric of logocentric metaphysics—to a point of view that is not itself already equally forestructured. Stevens' writing works continually from inside the horizon of this rhetoric—for it is only from within this horizon that writing can be written or thought be thought—demonstrating the constraints that bind it while necessarily repeating those constraints. It is a writing that, I think, agrees with Derrida's often-quoted observation that "*There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to attack metaphysics. We have no language—no syntax and no lexicon—which is alien to this history; we cannot utter a single destructive proposition which has not already slipped into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest.*"² It is, finally, this constraining horizon of metaphysics—a boundary to language that does not, however, divide an

inside from an outside, since an outside free from its constraints is ultimately unthinkable—that is demonstrated by Stevens' writing.

University of Texas, Austin

Notes

Quotations from Stevens' writings are all taken from the standard Knopf texts, which are abbreviated as follows:

CP—*The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*

OP—*Opus Posthumous*

NA—*The Necessary Angel*

¹Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 31.

²Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *The Structural Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, eds. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), p. 250.

Review

Wallace Stevens and Company: The *Harmonium* Years 1913-1923.

By Glen G. MacLeod. Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1983.

The aim in this slim volume, one of three on Stevens in a series of dissertations on modern literature published under the general editorship of A. Walton Litz, is to dispel the notion that Stevens was a literary loner during his formative *Harmonium* years. We see Stevens, despite his remarkable reticence and aloofness, as an active participant in New York avant garde movements, first as one of the "Patagonians" (Donald Evans, Allen and Louise Norton, and Carl Van Vechten) and then as one of what Stevens dubbed the "Art Crowd" (Walter Conrad Arensberg, Marcel Duchamp, and others who formed the nucleus of what came to be known as New York Dada). Stevens' literary relationships with Evans, Arensberg, and William Carlos Williams were particularly important. It is not exactly news, of course, that Stevens had such relationships: a number of sources such as the *Letters*, *Souvenirs and Prophecies*, and the memoirs and letters of his contemporaries in the New York scene have given glimpses of a Stevens associating with the artists and literati of that crucial 1913-1923 period. But *Wallace Stevens and Company* is rich in detail, adding considerably to our knowledge of the poet's aesthetic encounters during those years and their effect on his poetic development. As one who has done some investigating in the area covered by this study I am impressed by the author's research. The volume is slim but packed with matter.

The details charm with their evocation of the absolutely dedicated, often eccentric, people Stevens encountered in the heady atmosphere of aesthetic transformation which stimulated him to take the risks that led to his unique mastery. Beyond mere charm, however, the study is most valuable when it draws connections between the collective as well as individual influences and Stevens' work. It is persuasive, for example, when it demonstrates the effect of the "Patagonians," who were fascinated by Gertrude Stein's experimentation, and then of the Dadaists in helping to move Stevens from his *fin de siècle* mannerisms to the brilliant originality of *Harmonium*. This pattern of development is a major point in the study, although it becomes infrequently referred to in Part II, where Stevens' relations with four individual writers (Evans, Arensberg, Eugène Emmanuel Lemercier, a World War I soldier and artist whose posthumously published *Lettres d'un Soldat* became the source and the title for a series of poems by Stevens, and Williams) are examined. The discussions of these writers and Stevens illuminate the ways by which he could draw upon their influence and yet transcend it as he moved toward the fulfillment of his own inmost desires, following, as he declared to Williams, "a fixed point of view": "in order to carry a thing to the extreme necessary to convey it one has to stick to it." The chapter on Williams, for example, gave me a deeper understanding than I had of the productive tension that existed between

these two poets. Surely, as Glen G. MacLeod indicates, Williams was responsible for deflating some of Stevens' more extravagant mannerisms while at the same time, through his part in their ongoing debate, sharpening Stevens' sense of his own ultimate ends. MacLeod is helpful, too, when he focuses his attention upon a given poem, as when he discusses "The Worms at Heaven's Gate" in light of the advice Williams gave Stevens about a manuscript version of the poem, or when he refers to changes in the manuscript version of "Sonatina to Hans Christian" suggested by Arensberg, some of which Stevens adopted. I was especially pleased by MacLeod's treatment of the manuscript poem "Headache," which he suggests emerged as a humorous take-off of a fanciful etymological theory of Arensberg's according to which the letters of the alphabet have mystical or symbolical meaning. The analysis clears up most of what baffled me in this bizarre fugitive piece, explaining just what Stevens seems to have had in mind and just how his purpose seems to have become confused, thus adding to the poem's difficulty.

Usually, MacLeod presses his points with tact. Occasionally, however, he seems to strain, as when, for me, he claims too much of a connection between Arensberg's addiction to cryptography (through the use of which he was determined to prove that Bacon wrote Shakespeare's plays and to uncover hidden meanings in Dante) and the cryptic nature of Stevens' poems. When he discusses the influence of Evans' dandyism he quotes Baudelaire's statement that "Dandyism is the last gleam of heroism in times of decadence" and goes on to assert that Stevens' notion of the "supreme fiction" was an "exquisite" formulation tailored to fit the dandy/poseur. This is not so much a case of strain as of an interesting but unqualified assertion that requires development. The conception of a "supreme fiction" is surely a more complex matter than assumed here. The point is left more or less hanging, and indeed one of my complaints is that the parts of the study don't always move smoothly ahead, building in emphasis. This is especially the case in Part II where there seems to be no particular scheme for the placement of the chapters; the one on Lemercier could just as well be placed anywhere in the sequence. Placing the Williams chapter last, however, makes good sense, since his example served as an antidote to the examples of Evans and Arensberg, but MacLeod fails to capitalize on this point, thus ending the study unemphatically. The single paragraph Conclusion does not help in this regard. It does refer to many other issues that remain to be explored—Stevens' association with other "collaborators" such as Ferdinand Reyher and Pitts Sanborn, his brief career as a playwright, and "the relation between Stevens's poetry of 1921-22 . . . and the nearly universal call for a specifically American modernism that followed the War." Such matters are, alas, declared beyond the scope of the study. I like what MacLeod has produced within the limited scope but can only wish that he had been able to give us a more nearly full-scale and definitive study. Anticipating such criticism, he says in the Introduction that the chapters of Part II are in effect "a series of snapshots of the developing poet

at work. They do not attempt a single, definitive portrait." The whole study seems a series of suggestive snapshots which could be more tightly integrated. Better in its parts, then, than as a whole, *Wallace Stevens and Company* is still a worthy contribution.

Robert Buttel
Temple University

. . . We regret the following errors in Benedict Giamo's article, "On the Exquisite Plane of a Supreme Fiction," in the last issue:

- p. 38, line 26: "casing" should read "casting"
- p. 39, line 1: "idea" should read "ideal"
- p. 39, line 20: the article "a" was omitted
- p. 40, line 6: "tke" should read "take"
- p. 41, line 7: the article "a" was omitted
- p. 44, line 25: "face" should read "race."

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