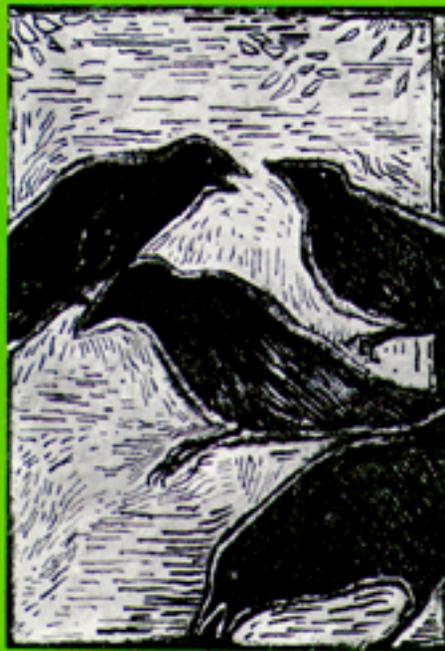


# The Wallace Stevens Journal



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## The One of Fictive Music: A Reading of "Esthétique du Mal"

DINNAH PLADOTT

The poetry of Wallace Stevens invites a variety of critical analyses and interpretations. As Northrop Frye comments, "Stevens is of particular interest and value to the critical theorist."<sup>1</sup> Most of this criticism focuses, however, on what Roman Jakobson termed "the referential function" of poetry.<sup>2</sup> Stevens, on the other hand, repudiated all attempts to divorce the poetic container from the thing contained. Agreeing with H. D. Lewis' observations in "On Poetic Truth," Stevens notes:

He protests against the abstraction of this content from the whole and the appraisal of it by other than aesthetic standards. The "something said" is important, but it is important for the poem only in so far as the saying of that something in a special way is a revelation of reality.<sup>3</sup>

The long poem, or rather, the series of fifteen poems, "Esthétique du Mal," illustrates and exemplifies the poet's observation. It turns out that music provides Stevens with a model for both the "something said" and for the "special way of saying it." While "fictive music" is here, as elsewhere, often the subject of poetry, the organizing principles which govern the selection of specific elements and their combination into sequences also derive from musical shaping techniques.

The basic constituent of "Esthétique du Mal" is not the fragmented aphorism or epigram, nor the insular image; it is a unit which recalls the musical "motif." Stevens spins the series of fifteen poems, or cantos, from a group of basic motifs, or thematic threads, which are rooted in the topic of the poem. As we read each individual stanza or canto, our attention is captured by the manner in which these motifs are interwoven, following the musical operation of repetition, modulation and variations on a single note. Moreover, the principles of analogy, opposition and complementarity or counterpoint are also in evidence. As a result, the poems woven and created by the motifs are in turn arranged not haphazardly but in chord-like groups.

The general division of cantos can be summarized as follows:

- |         |  |
|---------|--|
| I-II    | Establishing the argument in a concrete situation.   |
| III-IV  | Presenting the evasive responses to evil and pain, exposing their futility.  |
| V       | Celebration of human love.   |
| VI-VII  | Celebration of the reality of imperfection, and an indication that humans must absorb evil with the aid of Timeless Art. |
| VIII-IX | Analysis of negation and its disastrous effects.   |
| X-XIII  | Introduction of four different approaches to the reality   |

- of evil, characterized by an acknowledgment of imperfection.
- XIV A rhetorical attack on Utopianism.
- XV An affirmation of the vital reality of the world of process, where evil is a necessary and acceptable part of reality.

Within this larger scheme, Stevens' more subtle organizing instrument is the use of repetition—a poetic device much favored elsewhere in his poetry. That poetic device is put to fresh uses here. Stevens uses the repetition of words or phrases to organize a network of closely woven motifs, or thematic threads. It is in keeping with the meditative and intellectual tenor of this poem that these motifs consist not only of images *per se*, but also of denotative adjectives, abstract nouns, and verbs. The motif of evil, for example, may be represented alternatively by the expressions "soldier's wound," "catastrophe," "pain," "to suffer," etc. In other words, the motif will reappear in slightly altered or elaborated form. Key words and phrases may, however, reappear unchanged.

At least six major motifs may be discerned in the poem: 1) Evil, Mortality, and Imperfection; 2) Reality, Sun, Summer, Sensory Perceptions; 3) Poetry, Art; 4) Imagination, Moon, Blue; 5) Flowers; 6) Parents and Siblings (see Appendix). Clearly, the first four motifs are most visible in a poem whose subject is the aesthetic of evil and pain. The problems of mortality and imperfection; the dialectic of reality and the imagination; and the solution, in the form of poetry, all must naturally be presented, explored, stated and restated in many different ways. Yet there is nothing predictable about Stevens' artistic realization of this plan in a form which approximates a musical organization. Motifs undergo modulation and reformulation while they link the cantos and advance the argument, so that they simultaneously establish a referential and a poetic kinship, in Jakobson's terms, among the poems. Moreover, the recurrence of the motifs in other poems serves to establish a typical Stevensian signature which, like the Mozartian sound, immediately strikes the ear. Needless to say, such a musical arrangement places a heavy burden on the artist's imaginative ability. Mere mechanical repetition of motifs, without sufficient variation, would result in a monotonous, boring work. Stevens' mastery enables him to modulate his motifs often, so that each variation seems novel and fresh. The extent of his mastery is brought home when one attempts to paraphrase "Esthétique du Mal": the paraphrase is repetitive, but the poem is not.

A cursory glance at the scheme of the poem presented above reveals that its parts fall into blocks of two and four cantos, and only three cantos stand alone. This is a chordal arrangement, entirely in keeping with the musical organization of the poem. Stevens goes beyond a mere "variations on a theme" loose grouping, which would result in a linear "melody line." Instead he expresses each variation by a group of cantos. In these groups the individual stanzas do not merely repeat one another as they address certain aspects of the problem; they elaborate, extend, and modify one another, creating relations of complementarity. Thus each group of cantos is shaped into a harmonious chord. The relationship among

these chords is in turn founded on the principles of contrast and counterpoint, and not on a simple dialectical movement between two poles. Consequently, each individual chord, and the progression from one chord to another, resonate with additional tones and overtones. This explains the need to read the poem several times, until all the echoes and counterechoes, the sounds and the reverberations, are fully acknowledged.

The first two cantos set the stage for the poem, preparing the reader for the quest which is going to take place: the quest for the meaningful definition of the relationship between evil and the universe. In canto I, the detached poet-protagonist considers evil from a safe, emotional distance, as if the "volcano trembled in another ether." At this initial point, the exploration of pain is just an academic exercise, since "the terror of the sound" is mitigated by distance and time. Moreover, the fact that "the sound was ancient" may imply that it has not only occurred in the ancient past, but has also been described and classified. In other words, received ideas and attitudes ("ancient") may be a further insulation against the pain.<sup>4</sup> The problem of suffering is still only an intriguing puzzle, whose solution has no existential significance. In the second canto, the meditative stance is rejected. Relying no longer on the second-hand knowledge derived from his "book," he listens to the "accents of afflicted sleep" with a new, personal "despair." Consequently, the conclusion of the canto is that the impersonal meditation about evil and the denial of evil's personal significance are unrewarding: "that which rejects it saves it in the end." This chord thus communicates the first ground rule of the quest: it must be based on a personal, direct confrontation with reality. Stevens links the two members of this chord by the modulation of ideas as well as by minor motifs. The dichotomy between the universe and pain (which is "human") is at the center of both poems:

- I: Vesuvius might consume  
In solid fire the utmost earth and know  
No pain . . .
- II: It is pain that is indifferent to the sky . . .

The "roses" and "Vesuvius' groans" of canto I become the "acacias" and the "accents of afflicted sleep" in canto II. The kinship is therefore both thematic and formal.

Cantos III and IV form a second chord which contrasts with the first one. It depicts two kinds of response to reality which constitute a breach of the ground rule. Canto III deals with the religion of self pity, whose "over-human god" intervenes between people and suffering, and prevents a personal confrontation with evil. Such an evasive solution to the problem of evil is problematic for several reasons, according to Stevens. First, when the distinctions between human and divine are blurred, there is no longer any absolute to which imperfections may be referred. When the "god" "has made himself a man/ And is not to be distinguished," the result is a return to chaos, where "both heaven and hell/ Are one." Second, the ideal of a suffering and merciful god "Who has gone before us in experience" turns the existence of evil into an unintelligible paradox. Finally,

relieving humans "of woe both great/ And small" is tantamount to weakening them ("Weaken our fate").

Canto IV discredits the sentimental approach, which evades evil by evading the warm, imperfect reality of the individual and the particular. The sentimentalist, who likes "All sorts of flowers" (developing the flower motif of canto I) is juxtaposed with the artist "of the rose." The former is satisfied with abstractions and generalities—"Livre de Toutes Sortes de Fleurs d'après Nature." The latter "rescued the rose/ From nature," affirming its individual reality. The implication here, as in the previous canto, is that the perfect and the imperfect, beauty and pain, are integral constituents of reality, neither of which can be rejected with impunity. The same holds for mind and body. The body is "our world," our experiencing, sensing apparatus. The mind is "our being," our spiritual faculty. The former is "spent" by abstracting and devitalizing "false engagements of the mind." The divisive "evil in the self" can be resolved only through a reintegration of mind and body, exemplified by the artist: by a true engagement of the mind with the physical object, of imagination with reality.

Within the imperfect reality the poet-protagonist is learning to appreciate, canto V reveals another source of affirmation. This is a counterpoint to the sorrowful implication of the previous chord, namely, that to be human is to be imperfect. It argues that equally human are the "unity" and "bliss" of human love. Love, like pain, is "Within what we permit,/ Within the actual, the warm, the near." The "true sympathizers," unlike "the sentimentalist," realize that in order to be "wholly human" one must accept the dual nature of reality. This leads to a defiant rejection of religious adoration. The "in-bar" of the inner self, though exquisitely poorer than the impressive "suns of ex-bar," must replace them. It retains, however, the "attributes" of joy and beauty vested once upon a time in the "golden forms" of the deities. Human imperfection, rather than divine perfection, becomes the focus of "the fire of the festivals."

Cantos VI and VII form a third chord by dramatizing the idea that perfection and immortality are unattainable. The chordal effect is enhanced by the manner in which the sad, solemn tone of stanza VII complements the "clownish" tone of canto VI. Both poems are more general and abstract than the previous cantos. In canto VI, the subject is not human, but divine imperfection. Stevens chooses to present it in the form of a parable or "a children's story of mirror images," as Helen Vendler describes it.<sup>5</sup> The sun which is both a source of vital energy and the signaler of cosmic time becomes Stevens' symbol for the world of process, of becoming, and thus, of the imperfect reality. The human appetite for perfection, represented by the big pecking bird, is like the sun's, "insatiable" (cf. the comment "It can never be satisfied, the mind, never," p. 247). The "grossest appetite" confronts the relentless process of ripening and change whereby the individual is sucked toward death and "downwardly revolves." The partial triumph over the commonplace and the mundane is achieved here when mutability, in the form of the solar clock, whets the human craving for the transcendent "celestial sight." But the dialectical process remains unresolved.

Mutability and mortality reappear in canto VII, as a subject for a mawkish elegy:

How red the rose that is the soldier's wound,  
The wound of many soldiers, the wound of all  
The soldiers that have fallen, red in blood,  
The soldier of time grown deathless in great size.

The modulation of the "redness" motif and the use of repetition enlarge a conceit—the rose as wound—and shape it into a universal emblem of mortality. The rose, a common symbol of transience, is also traditionally associated with the immortality of Christ.<sup>6</sup> Yet its redness is that of the life blood. Moreover, the setting is the fullness of summer, rather than the bleakness of winter, reinforcing the poet's association of the red color with reality (canto VI). The implication is that death is a stage in the living process where motion and rest, development and decay, alternate and recur. The individual death does not alter the paradox of living in which the "shadows" which attend it are "motionless/ Of their own part, yet moving on the wind" (cf. "The Death of a Soldier," p. 977). The cyclical process of becoming and dying is solemnized in the figure of the sacrificial victim who is both dead and "deathless." Moreover, the poetic forms of the parable and the elegy, in which symbolism displaces evil, indicate the capacity of the imagination to transmute painful reality into the aesthetic experience that absorbs and transcends it. The presence of the motifs of reality—the "yellow bloom," "yellow fruit," "red rose," "fragrance," and "summer's sleep"—which are woven into the tapestry depicting mutability and decay exemplifies this imaginative feat whereby evil and sensuous reality become one aesthetic whole.

The fourth chord, cantos VIII and IX, provides a counterpoint to its predecessor by exploring the "tragedy of the imagination." If the imaginative grappling with the actuality of evil and suffering may be posited as redemptive, then its absence—the attempt to negate evil in any of its forms—leads to destitution. The two cantos complement one another by examining "negation" in theological and artistic terms, respectively: the loss of religious beliefs and the loss of faith in artistic sensibilities. "Satan," the antithesis of the "over-human god" of canto III, is an archetypal, religious figure whose symbolic role is to account for the imperfection of a fallen world. When traditional religious explanations no longer carry conviction, "Satan" is "destroyed." The "tragedy for the imagination" implicit in that event results from the simultaneous annihilation of "many blue phenomena." Religious beliefs may be only "phantoms," but without their formal means of grasping evil, the "shaken realist" is deprived of his freedom to create imaginatively, associated in Stevens' poetry with "blue." Instead, he is faced with "cold vacancy." In canto IX, the same "panic" is traced to the realization that secular images, as well, no longer obtain. The moon here is one of the lunar avatars of the imagination in Stevens' poetry. Without its "folly" one loses the regenerative powers of the imagination, and must contemplate, unaided, "comic ugliness/ Or lustered nothingness." Moreover, the "paradise of meanings," the rich and complex reality, is reduced to "one meaning alone" when shorn of the redemptive embellishment of "sight's miraculous thrift." As Stevens expresses it elsewhere, "one would want more, one would need more, / More than a world of white and snowy accents" (p. 194). The rich mosaic of black and white, evil

and good, must be encompassed in its entirety and transmuted by artistic imagination: "imagination's new beginning," merely hinted at in the previous canto, is developed in detail here as "another and later genesis." Not only "a chant" but a spell-binding "incantation" is the imaginative musical shield which must be fashioned in order to protect a nascent symbol of peace—the "halcyon"—against the predatory elements represented by the "haggardie." As in canto IV, the aesthetic victory lies neither in reductive evasion ("one meaning alone") nor in disorganized chaos ("all sorts of notes"), but in perceiving and linking overtones and undertones: "associates,/ Variations in the tones of a single sound" (canto IV). Through its contrary example, this chord elaborates and emphasizes the implication of previous chords: only with the aid of the imagination can the human "passion for yes" which underlies "every no" be transmuted and refashioned into a viable, "primitive ecstasy."

The fifth chord—cantos X-XIII—deals with the ways in which this "primitive ecstasy" can be realized. Four different approaches to reality and evil illustrate the ability of the imagination to furnish an individual with diverse metaphors that enable one to assimilate and encompass the actuality of suffering or imperfection. Stanza X, picking up the motif of the parents, contrasts the reality of the "maternal . . . the softest/ Woman with a vague moustache" with the "nostalgia" of the "mauve *Maman*." The next poem presents reality in a vision of a violent, dehumanized world, which is nevertheless preferable to the "confected," idealized but artificial world. Canto XIII reintroduces the parent-child motif. It compares the "fragmentary tragedy" of injustice to the "major tragedy" of mortality, concluding that "evil in evil is comparative." Canto XII suggests a philosophical analysis, where thesis and antithesis, in the form of "peopled" and "unpeopled" worlds, are synthesized into a "third world [which] accepts whatever is as true,/ Including pain."

The harmonious relationship among the four members of this chord derives from their similar depiction of imaginative engagement with reality as it is. In canto X, the beloved "woman" and the idealized eternal mother, the "mauve *Maman*," are superimposed and decorated with a "vague moustache" so as to present the paradox of flawed reality. The same antinomial nature of reality is discovered when reality and fantasy, soul and body, "anima" and "animal," the "maternal" and the "grossly" conjoin to "most fecundly assuage him." This is proposed as a cause for optimism, for an acceptance of death and suffering as parts of "the innocence of living."<sup>8</sup> The canto ends, however, on an ambiguous note by positing the discovery as a conjecture whose expression, or rather, its assertion, is the real liberating force: "To say that it was/ Disentangled him from sleek ensolacings."<sup>9</sup>

The ambiguity stands in sharp contrast to the conviction of canto XI, transmitted through an internal set of opposites. Imperfect reality, "bitter aspic," contrasts with a "well-made scene"; "waves of people" with "confected ocean"; "Paratroopers fall" with "paratroopers select adieux"; the disorderly "bell-billows" which "bell-bellows in the village steeple" is the antithesis of the controlled "steeple that tip-tops the classic sun's arrangements." Finally, as the pivotal distiche at the center of the canto, Stevens constructs a symmetrical opposition:

Natives of poverty, children of malheur,  
The gaiety of language is our seigneur.

As in canto II, the "confected," "pink" "arrangement" from which evil, disharmony and ruin have been expunged, is rejected. The canto ends in a celebration of the "exacerbations" which stimulate enjoyment, particularize pleasure and pain, and provide the senses with distinct and intense data. It is a conclusion which echoes the assertion of "Sunday Morning": "death is the mother of beauty." Here "poverty" and "malheur" are transformed into a "gaiety of language" which is an imaginative, artistic creation.

Canto XII seems at first to be a digression from the subject at hand to epistemological problems. It has been criticized, for example, for being merely "a calculated piece of dialectic, examining the poet's relation to his world through the formula of subject-object antithesis and synthesis."<sup>10</sup> In fact, however, the dialectic examines not mere ambiguities of self-knowledge, but another individual response to the discovery of flawed reality. In the subjective as well as in the objective realms, the "knowledge" of "the people" and of "himself" seems a tentative counterbalance to the agony of being "alone." However, first, intellectual rigor, the demand "that what he thinks be true" (echoing canto V, where "he" was "merciless to accomplish truth in his intelligence"), ultimately "destroys both worlds." Second, the truth of his cosmic isolation renders all metaphysical exercises hollow, and leads to the acceptance of a "third world" where palpable reality replaces categorizations and abstractions. The implication is that only by shedding one's intellectual preconceptions can one, like the "ignorant man" of "The Sense of the Sleight-of-hand Man," come in contact with actuality and "mate his life with life" (p. 222). Then and only then can "true" and "false" be grasped as relative terms, so that "pain" could be "true" by definition when viewed as an integral part of "whatever is," but might be considered "false" "otherwise."

The relative nature of evil reappears as the focus of the next grappling with pain (canto XIII). The injustice of "punishment" when it is unmerited is merely "a fragmentary tragedy/ Within the universal whole." The "major tragedy" is the mortal condition itself, affecting alike the guilty and the innocent, "father" and "son." Humanity and mortality are inextricably entwined in an "unalterable necessity." Yet the physical being which is subject to destruction—"this unalterable animal"—is the very perceiving apparatus which confronts reality and shapes it in a personal manner (cf. canto IV). Moreover, as the notion has been developed in "A Dish of Peaches in Russia," physical being and personal, existential history are conjoined: "Who speaks? But it must be that I,/ That animal, that Russian, that exile" (p. 224). "This unalterable animal" is therefore an ambivalent term, since the mortal prison is also the instrument of perception and experience. The "ultimate good" of sensuous enjoyment is also "The assassin's scene"; evil is disclosed "within this maximum," and life and death are seen in their relative and related nature: "Evil in evil is comparative." Only from this relative vantage point can death be viewed as "the happiest enemy" and accepted as intelligible.

The four endings of the members of this chord testify to the difficulty of arriving at such triumphant solutions. The assertive "[disentanglement] from sleek en-

solacing" (canto X) is followed by the equivocal last quatrain of stanza XI, which suggests that pain may be a potential mother of beauty. Canto XII concludes with a questioning distiche underlining the difficulty of attaining the "third world." In that, Stevens clearly differs from Hegel, Emerson or Whitman, who dispose of evil with dialectical equanimity. The repeated questions here dramatize the fact that despite all arguments about the "truth" of pain, no individual or "lover" can blithely claim immunity from anguish. It takes a Kierkegaardian "leap of faith" to bridge the gap between the "rocks" of reality (cf. "The Rock") and the cosmology where evil has been disposed of. Finally, in canto XIII, Stevens foregoes the possibility of ending upon a high note of affirmation sounded in "evil in evil is comparative." He adds four and a half lines which undercut this exaltation with a mixture of irony, lament and complaint. He describes existence as "an adventure to be endured/ With the politest helplessness," and responds with a humorous groan—"Ay-mi!"—similar to the "ai ai" of canto V. Hence this chord does not merely explore afresh the varieties of possible imaginative grappling with evil; it also demonstrates in its very form the difficulty of arriving at a final reconciliation and assent to the reality of evil.

To emphasize the tones sounded in the fifth chord, and to set the stage for the resolution of the last canto, Stevens provides one last dissonant note (canto XIV). Here he exposes the "logical lunacy" of any attempt to construct an ideology on an evil-free vision of the world. The rational revolutionary has a Utopian dream which is ideal, perfectible, and totally inhuman. It is guided by a "logic not to be distinguished/ From lunacy," since all contradictions have been expunged from this "intellectual structure." The reference to Victor Serge may indicate that the Utopian movement in question may be communism, but the indictment is equally applicable to revolutionary movements which have faith in a "perfect" political system. Their false "logic," replacing the disorder and amalgam of the real world by a Platonic, perfect "world of ideas," is compounded by tyranny. They desire to force the whole of humanity into the mold of "one idea," recalling the negative "one meaning alone" of canto IX that led the individual to "being destitute." The fanatic revolutionary, obsessed by the idea of a uniform, earthly paradise, fails to appreciate his physical being, or the concrete particulars of physical existence such as "lakes." He "would not be aware" of either "lakes" or "clouds," and would merely "interrupt/ With his lunacy."<sup>11</sup> The contrast between canto XIV and the preceding chord is emphasized by its succinct last line: "His extreme of logic would be illogical." This contrast conveys the conviction that struggling honestly with the reality of evil and suffering may indeed have uncertain and inconclusive results, but is always preferable to escapist or delusory maneuvers.

The dissonant note sounded in canto XIV gives greater resonance to the affirmative conviction which follows in the canto. The transition is effected through the first lines of stanza XV, which comments directly on the inadequacy of the Utopian-Platonic flight. The "cold vacancy" of canto VIII, the "lustered nothingness" of "pure poverty" and "being destitute" of canto IX, the "lunacy" of canto XIV, are disparate terms for the sterile results of such subterfuge, and canto XV opens with a categorical exposure of their "poverty." Stevens recapitulates previ-

ous arguments, demonstrating once again that reality is a composite construction of antinomies, such as "desire-despair," "physical-metaphysical." An attempt to repudiate one half of the antinomial equation leads only to "the greatest poverty": the real—"death"—and the ideal—"paradise"—are not to be isolated or distinguished from each other, but to be accepted as complementary parts of one compound whole. Having reached that point, one may indeed glory in the ability to embrace all palpable experience and sensory perceptions, and the power of the imagination to transform the "dark italics" into an aesthetic creation, "the right chorale." The progression from "poverty" to "delight" is reflected by the diction and the tone of poems XIV and XV. The former utilizes stark diction, few images, one simile, and its mood or tone is somber and discursive. Monochromatic language and ironic understatement produce abstract and detached discourse where "uneasiness" is "blank" and "fire" is "white" without color or heat. The concluding canto, on the other hand, bubbles with emotion and brims over with colors, smells, sounds and sensations: "The green corn gleams," the "August heat" inflames, and the individual "sees" and "hears" and "feels."

Concrete diction and novel metaphors alike are harnessed here in order to evoke in all its composite beauty a palpable, real world where, paradoxically, "the metaphysicals/ Lie sprawling in majors of August heat." The abstract and the concrete are reunited and reintegrated, invalidating in the process the reductivism of both "a race/ Completely physical in a physical world" and that of the unearthly "paradise" which remains "unknown." The ability to accept the multiplicity and confusion of "merely living as and where we live" is the direct result of the supreme imaginative achievement. Fittingly, therefore, the poem which proclaims this regenerative capacity gives an impression similar to that of a polyphonic, choral song of praise and thanksgiving. It carries out Stevens' blueprint for the poetic affirmation:

This is the thesis scrivenered in delight,  
The reverberating psalm, the right chorale.

In sum, we can apply Stevens' own words to his poetry: "the arrangement contains the desire of the artist." This "arrangement," or "special way of saying," is far from formless. If this "arrangement" is unobtrusive or even concealed, that may be attributed to the romantic belief which Frye describes as "the maxim that art should conceal art."<sup>12</sup> Yet the aesthetic consideration—Jakobson's "poetic function"—is clearly the predominant one: Stevens' ideas, those "epistemological, ontological and moral propositions," as Pearce defined them,<sup>13</sup> are denuded of their glory and their extraordinary power when presented in a paraphrase. It is the poetic organization of the material in its specific structure and shape, the ordering of words—be they images, descriptions of sense perceptions, propositions or metaphors—into motifs and chords, which gives the poem its special sound and flavor. The "fictive music" Stevens so often associates with poetry thus comes into being.

## Appendix

### 1) *Evil, Mortality, and Imperfection*

- I "pain" (7 times), "groaned," "terror," "torturing," "the end of life," "catastrophe," "to die," "destroyed"
- II "afflicted," "despair," "pain"
- III "hell" (4 times), "cry," "suffer," "woe"
- IV "evil" (2 times), "fault," "misfortune"
- V "sorrow," "sob," "lament," "poverty"
- VI "fails," "askew," "rejected," "imperfection," "lapses," "gross"
- VII "soldier's wound" (4 times), "blood," "death," "deathless" (3 times), "soldiers"
- VIII "death," "tragedy," "negation," "Satan," "underground," "assassin" (2 times), "mortal no," "tragic expirations," "cold vacancy"
- IX "panic," "comic ugliness," "poverty," "destitute"
- X "pain," "gross," "grossly," "suffer," "die"
- XI "bitter aspic," "paratroopers," "buried," "poverty," "malheur," "exacerbations"
- XII "destroys," "pain" (2 times), "false"
- XIII "punishment," "fragmentary tragedy," "major tragedy," "enemy," "assassin" (2 times), "evil" (2 times), "the force that destroys us"
- XIV "uneasiness," "lunatic," "die," "martyr," "graves," "tombs" (2 times), "lunacy" (3 times)

### 2) *Reality, Sun, Summer, Sensory Perceptions*

- II "the yellow of the acacias," "the scent of [the acacias]"
- III "hives," "honey of common summer," "health of the worlds," "reddest," "golden combs"
- IV "dark blooded," "our being," "our world"
- V "the actual," "the warm," "the near," "brilliances," "suns" ("golden forms" — a mutation)
- VI "sun," "clownish yellow," "yellow bloom," "yellow fruit," "redness," "ripening," "yellow grassman"
- VII "red" (3 times), "the summer fragrance," "a summer"
- VIII "red" (3 times), "realist" (2 times), "reality"
- IX "to see what one sees," "to hear what one hears"
- X "the most grossly maternal," "the softest woman," "earth," "reality," "the gross," "the fecund"
- XI "pink," "sun"
- XII "the world," "whatever is," "such rocks"
- XIII "the universal whole," "zone of . . . orange versicoloring," "the visible," "reality," "the blood," "this maximum"
- XIV "the lake"
- XV "physical world," "green corn," "majors of August heat," "what one sees and hears," "living as and where we live"

### 3) Poetry, Art

- I "book," "paragraphs," "sound," "phrases"
- II "warblings," "syllables"
- III "stanzas"
- IV "music" (2 times), "transparent sounds," "variations in the tones of a single sound"
- V "phrases"
- IX "proverbs," "crickets' chant," "another chant," "an incantation," "music," "sound"
- XV "reverberating psalm," "right chorale," "thesis scrivined in delight"

### 4) Imagination, Moon, Blue

- II "moon" (2 times)
- IV "transparence," "his own special eye"
- V "central sense"
- VI "lunar month" "celestial sight"
- VIII "imagination" (2 times), "blue phenomena"
- IX "moon" (3 times), "[sight's] miraculous thrit," "sensibility"
- XI "the gaiety of language"
- XIII "zone of blue"
- XV "who could have thought to make so many selves, so many sensuous worlds"

### 5) Flowers

- I "roses"
- II "acacias" (2 times)
- IV "Toutes Sortes de Fleurs," "All sorts of flowers," "rose" (2 times)
- V "Flower"
- VI "yellow bloom"
- VII "rose"
- XI "violets" (2 times)
- XV "green corn"

### 6) Parents and Siblings

- III "our oldest parent"
- V "brother," "father," "mother"
- VIII "filial"
- X "maternal," "Maman," "child of mothers," "mothers"
- XIII "son's life for the father's," "son," "father"

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Northrop Frye, "The Realistic Oriole: A Study of Wallace Stevens," in *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1963), p. 238.

<sup>2</sup>Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics" (1958), reprinted in Richard and Fernande de Georges, eds., *The Structuralists: From Marx to Levi-Strauss* (Doubleday Anchor, 1971). Stevens criticism has shown an overwhelming concern with ideational content. Moreover, the subject of form comes up in a context of

bafflement and deprecation. See Frank Kermode, *Wallace Stevens* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1960), p. 105; J. N. Riddel, "The Metaphysical Changes of 'Esthétique du Mal,'" *Twentieth Century Literature*, 7 (July 1961), p. 68. Both pioneers of Stevens criticism see the poem as disjointed and lacking a unifying element. Furthermore, the charge of weak structuring sometimes appears as praise; see Roy Harvey Pearce, "Wallace Stevens: The Life of the Imagination," in *Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Twentieth Century Views, Marie Borroff, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), p. 118; J. N. Riddel, *The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), p. 204. Even recent explorations of structure, provocative and fascinating in themselves, undertake the project with such a comprehensive scope that the result is, once more, a look at the content of Stevens' whole canon. See Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Cornell University Press, 1976); James Baird, *The Dome and the Rock: Structure in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1968).

<sup>9</sup>Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1951), pp. 98-99. This authorial comment gains authority and credence from the fact that Stevens is not referring to his own poetry in particular.

<sup>10</sup>Minda-Rae Amiran has called my attention to the light thrown on this point by Stevens' poem, "A Postcard from the Volcano."

<sup>11</sup>Vendler, for example, notes Stevens' "frequent recourse to a form which approximates the musical theme with variations," but links this structuring principle to a "notorious narrowness in subject," in *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Long Poems* (Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 14. For once, her comment seems to me infelicitous.

<sup>12</sup>Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (New York: Atheneum, 1970), p. 144.

<sup>13</sup>Baird offers a slightly different reading, in which the wind is the central symbol (pp. 140-42).

<sup>14</sup>This is the idea that "life/ Itself was innocent," expressed also in "The Auroras of Autumn" (p. 411), which denies that any malign intent can be discerned in the events of existence. Without such fatal design, when events are viewed as "slightly caprice" rather than tragic "destiny," tragedy is transformed into "jetted tragedy" (p. 417); and the "pitiful man" is shorn of tragic pathos when "a time of innocence/ As pure principle" circumscribes, "pinches," the "pity of the pitiful man" (p. 418). In "Esthétique du Mal" the argument is qualified: "That he might suffer or that/ He might die was the innocence of living, if life/ Itself was innocent." Pain becomes "impersonal pain," and thus endurable, if and only if the conjecture that "life itself was innocent" of malevolent purpose is substantiated.

<sup>15</sup>The "if" in the phrase "if life itself was innocent" recalls Vendler's observation that Stevens makes extensive use of qualifying and questioning forms such as "if," "as if," "maybe," etc., for various rhetorical and logical effects (pp. 28-29). The reading of such terms must therefore depend on the individual context, and may be open to various interpretations. Vendler adds, however, that the use of syntactic and semantic uncertainty appears often "when Stevens is most himself," i.e., when he is most convinced (p. 14).

<sup>16</sup>Riddel, *Clairvoyant Eye*, p. 212.

<sup>17</sup>The contrast between palpable physical reality and arid theoretical ideas is expressed in the juxtaposition of "lakes" and "oceans." The difficulty of deciphering this metaphor is illustrated by the turn-about in its reading by one of Stevens' acute critics. In 1961, Riddel read "lakes" as "circumscribed reality of finite proportions to which the politico-realist is indifferent." Lakes, assumes Riddel, are "vital, defined particulars more real than undifferentiated cosmos" ("The Metaphysical Changes," p. 76). By 1965, Riddel reverses this position: The poet's revolutionists compose "their visions within bounded 'lakes' which the poet finds ironically to be 'more reasonable than oceans.' To live in the singular world of one idea is to submit chaos to an intellectual cosmos which, in terms of an earlier poem, is a violent order" (*Clairvoyant Eye*, p. 214). These two contradictory readings testify to the obscurity and complexity of the metaphor. My own reading is guided by the assertion that "Konstantinov" would not be aware of the lake. The fanatic believer in an earthly Utopia would indeed be blind to the vital but imperfect reality of "lake," "cloud," or "fire." Oblivious to the pleasure which may be derived from contemplating them, he would "interrupt" and "promenade . . . by the lake." Read thus, the metaphor lends itself to Riddel's original interpretation, rather than to its revision.

<sup>18</sup>*Fables of Identity*, p. 251.

<sup>19</sup>Pearce, "Wallace Stevens: The Life of the Imagination," p. 121.

## "An Abstraction Blooded": Wallace Stevens and R. S. Thomas on Blackbirds and Men

WILLIAM V. DAVIS

R. S. Thomas' "Thirteen Blackbirds Look at a Man" is obviously and immediately indebted to and will be inevitably associated with Wallace Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." What is perhaps most intriguing about this association is that Thomas, an extremely individual man and poet, at the height of his career, should so obviously indebt himself to any other poet, least of all to a poet as dominant and dominating as Stevens. The fact that, save for this poem, Thomas' indebtedness to Stevens is so subtle as to be easily missed, suggests that this poem, atypical for Stevens, struck Thomas in such a way that, in his equally atypical poem, he gives us a somewhat disguised reference to a most important aspect of his work.<sup>1</sup>

Stevens said, about his "Thirteen Ways,"<sup>2</sup> "This group of poems is not meant to be a collection of epigrams or of ideas, but of sensations."<sup>3</sup> Thomas' "Thirteen Blackbirds" might be described as a collection of epigrams or ideas, without sensations. Stevens is, if anything, a poet of "sensations" and Thomas, if anything, is a poet of "ideas." That is, Stevens generally starts with images, "sensations," and builds his poem up around them in such a way that it comes to express his "idea." Thomas, on the other hand, tends to begin with an "idea," a statement he wishes to express and then finds images, "sensations," to describe the idea he has in mind. In "Thirteen Blackbirds" then, Thomas forces a reversal on Stevens' "Thirteen Ways" so that the focus is turned specifically and insistently toward the man who is seen from the point of view of the blackbirds, whereas in Stevens' poem the blackbirds symbolize the turnings of the speaker's mind with respect to his own situation. This difference of approach to similar material is typical of the difference in technique between Stevens and Thomas, a difference defined adequately enough as that between the use of "sensations" and the use of "ideas."

But more important than anything else is the fact that, thematically, both poems may best be seen as apocalyptic in the sense that they participate in and anticipate the final stage of apocalyptic thought, what M. H. Abrams defines as "apocalypse by imagination or cognition."<sup>4</sup>

Notions of apocalypse have attracted, intrigued, even obsessed both Stevens and Thomas. But they have been rather different notions of apocalypse. Whereas, for Stevens, the idea of apocalypse, growing, as it does, from a theologic source, has always been primarily a metaphor, a "poetic idea" to be treated in a "sensational" way, for Thomas the idea of apocalypse is exclusively associated with a theological, Christian source and is to be treated, even if metaphorically, as a philosophic or theologic "truth." If both poets might well agree that "the imagination is always at the end of an era," as Stevens said,<sup>5</sup> they would, no doubt, disagree on the way or ways in which that imagination describes the end of that era. For instance, one doubts that Thomas would unreservedly accept the con-

clusions which Stevens draws from the following premises—although Thomas, surely, would accept these premises:

The major poetic idea in the world is and always has been the idea of God. One of the visible movements of the modern imagination is the movement away from the idea of God. The poetry that created the idea of God will either adapt it to our different intelligence, or create a substitute for it, or make it unnecessary. These alternatives probably mean the same thing . . .<sup>6</sup>

But whether or not Stevens and Thomas might come to the same logical conclusions about these matters, surely they have both focused much of their major poetic attention on them and in their companion poems on blackbirds and men the essence of their differences becomes clear, both thematically and stylistically. Since Stevens' poem has been with us for more than fifty years and since it is as well-known as almost any of his poems, it might, in this context, be enough to say that it appears to be, if not the most overt (one thinks of "Sunday Morning" and "The Snow Man" of the poems in *Harmonium*), one of the many poems in which Stevens, throughout his career, attempted to define the "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is,"<sup>7</sup> the essence of his description of an apocalyptic moment detailed in terms of "sensation." Thomas' "Thirteen Blackbirds Look at a Man" is one of his most recent poems<sup>8</sup> and it comes at the conclusion of his period of major work during the past decade and thus might seem to be almost a summary piece for him.

"Thirteen Blackbirds Look at a Man" recounts a myth. The setting is an Eden seen from the point of view of a flock of thirteen blackbirds. Thus, immediately, there is a reversal of perspective which points up the contrast between one myth of beginnings and this alternate myth of beginnings. The first section of the poem (each section, like the Stevens poem, a single stanza) sets the scene in a place of Edenic innocence intruded on, in the final line, by the presence of "a man."

1

It is calm.  
It is as though  
we lived in a garden  
that had not yet arrived  
at the knowledge of  
good and evil.  
But there is a man in it.

Once the knowledge of good and evil has been introduced into this world by the presence of the man, the suggestion seems to be that anything can happen. What does seem to happen is that things immediately diminish:

2

There will be  
rain falling vertically

from an indifferent  
sky. There will stare out  
from behind its  
bars the face of the man  
who is not enjoying it.

3

Nothing higher  
than a blackberry  
bush. As the sun comes up  
fresh, what is the darkness  
stretching from horizon  
to horizon? It is the shadow  
here of the forked man.

Curiously, after this strong, controlled and specifically focused beginning, the tone breaks in the central sections of the poem before coming back to insist on its stated theme at the end. In this sense the poem begins and ends better than it middles.<sup>9</sup> Whatever the reasons for the shift of tone in sections seven, eight, ten, and eleven, the myth of the garden spoiled by the presence of the man is clearly the theme of the poem.

A kind of Stevensian "domination of black"<sup>10</sup> runs through the Thomas piece, from the blackbirds to the blackberries they eat, whose seeds, when they spit them out, "lie/ glittering like the eyes of a man." The man is responsible for the pervasive darkness in the world of the poem and the blackbirds, their singing disturbed by the man's whistling, "wipe [their] beaks/ on the branches/ wasting the dawn's/ jewellery to get rid/ of the taste of a man."

The peaceful repose in the garden has been forever disturbed by the presence of the man:

9

In the cool  
of the day the garden  
seems given over  
to blackbirds. Yet  
we know also that somewhere  
there is a man in hiding.

This man-presence becomes a possibility fraught with terror in the world of blackbirds:

12

When night comes  
like a visitor  
from outer space  
we stop our ears

lest we should hear tell  
of the man in the moon.

13

Summer is  
at an end. The migrants  
depart. When they return  
in spring to the garden  
will there be a man among them?

Thus the poem ends, on a question. The season in the garden is finished, the "migrants/ depart." When the new season comes, when the migrants return in the spring, "will there be a man among them?" The blackbirds obviously fear that there will be, that the man-presence which has intruded upon their peaceful world is there to stay, that, indeed this ominous presence will be there to usher in the new season when the year, in a world of blackbirds, begins again. The parable, then, is of an inevitably approaching apocalyptic era, an era which will put an end to the repose of all gardens, an era in which the "forked" man's presence intrudes into every stanza and cannot be eradicated, no matter how hard the blackbirds try. Furthermore, the man will be unable to "incubate a solution" to the problem he himself has created. The man at the end of Thomas' poem, like the blackbird at the end of Stevens', is an omen of death.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Thomas, clearly, has long had Stevens in the back of his mind. More than twenty years ago, he published "Wallace Stevens," a poem which now reads not only as Thomas' early tribute to Stevens, but can be seen as pointing a direction for his own future work—although in no way does it suggest or anticipate the complicity of the two poems being considered here. (See R. S. Thomas, *The Bread of Truth* [London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1963], pp. 25-26). And if Thomas has long had Stevens in mind, he continues to keep him in mind. In his most recent interview, just published, he says, "I think Wallace Stevens comes nearest to expressing the situation, in poetry." (See R. S. Thomas Talks to J. B. Lethbridge, "Anglo-Welsh Review, No. 74 [1983], p. 56).

<sup>2</sup>Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), pp. 92-95.

<sup>3</sup>Holly Stevens, ed., *Letters of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 251.

<sup>4</sup>M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1971), p. 334.

<sup>5</sup>Quoted in Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 31.

<sup>6</sup>Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), xv.

<sup>7</sup>Stevens, *Collected Poems*, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup>"Thirteen Blackbirds Look at a Man" is included in the "New Poems" section of Thomas' *Later Poems: A Selection* (London: Macmillan, 1983), pp. 174-176.

<sup>9</sup>One wonders whether, having gotten into it, the necessity of the Stevens model demanding thirteen sections, Thomas, notoriously given to short, singly-focused poems, might have run into difficulties in the middle of the poem. (There are, of course, similar, sometimes ironic, shifts in other Thomas poems.)

<sup>10</sup>Cf. Stevens' poem "Domination of Black," *Collected Poems*, pp. 8-9.

## "Sunday Morning": Stevens' Equivocal Lyric

JOY POHL

"Sunday Morning," Stevens' great lyric espousing the preeminence of physical reality, proceeds by juxtaposing a set of correspondences which establish the richness and vitality of material existence with a parallel although opposing set of correspondences which depict the diminished sensations of a spiritualized sensibility. The poem then resembles a dialectic, but one in which the poet seems to manifest by his choice of metaphor a favored position. Thus the religious is associated with dark, distance, shade, silence, the diminution of life to a kind of reflective abstraction, whereas the secular is identified by light, proximity, color, sound, a riotous concretion of experience. Even the characters of the two personae seem to argue the poet's predilection—the grave, musing woman's self-absorption, her random associations, contrasting unfavorably with the briskly assertive, third-person logic of the male speaker. For these reasons most critics argue that the position of the male persona is the position advocated by the poet. Some, like Ronald Sukenick, even equate the two positions, arguing that "the dialogue is between the author and his female persona, the former resolving the questions that arise in the thought of the latter."<sup>1</sup> This movement to resolution, others such as Lucy Beckett, J. Hillis Miller, and Susan B. Weston note, is atypical of Stevens' oeuvre, a body of verse more frequently characterized by ambivalence rather than certitude, by a tentativeness of proposition and delicate equivocation rather than surety.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, they persist in reading the poem as a kind of paean to humanism, an affirmation of the sufficiency of the life of the senses by a poet infrequently, if ever again, so affirmative.

There are several things wrong with such a reading. First, it marks as aberrant a major work in the poet's canon, failing to explain a deviation all the more puzzling because it seems to differ from what the poet produced contemporaneously as well as later. Second, it accepts as surface value the thinly disguised didacticism of the male speaker, ignoring the delicate irony of his penchant for aphorism and parable, for using religious forms to deny the validity of religious forms. Third, it denies that the two voices inform one another. Concentrating instead on the more assertive and vigorous imagery associated with the male speaker ("the pungent fruit and bright, green wing" versus "the silent shadows of divinity"; April's recurrent green versus the "cloudy Palm on heaven's hill"), it presumes that the relative strength of the two voices measures the validity of their two positions, that intensity in the poem is a substantive matter determining veracity. Finally, it concludes that the overall effect of the poem is to create in the reader a sense of the sublime sufficiency of the physical world whereas what is created instead by, among other things, the image of life as a casual sinking into darkness is a sense of the inevitable and poignant finality of death. The poem then is not quite the positive affirmation that these readers have surmised. Rather it too is couched in the equivocation which typifies Stevens' works. Death may well be, as the male speaker repeatedly asserts, "the mother of beauty," but there

is nonetheless an element of pathos in the "sure obliteration" which "she strews . . . on our paths," and this too he comes to express.

"Sunday Morning" then is not about the achievement of a new vision which reconciles humans to a world which the gods have vacated. Rather it is about the persistent failure of all vision, even that of the male speaker. This becomes readily apparent in an examination of the poem's imagery, for all things which suggest the possibility of transcendence, of movement toward vision are undercut. Mountains, traditionally sacred places where humans can commune with the divine, remain stubbornly secular. The "heaven's hill" denigrated in stanza IV becomes the "echoing hills" of stanza VII which chorus pagan chants. And this too devolves to a wholly natural image of a simple mountain top upon which deer walk. The sky also refuses to manifest any mediating vision, remaining "indifferent and dividing," its alien perfection suggesting a place of isolation inimical to human embrace. Perhaps most striking, however, is the function of birds.

Birds are frequently used to suggest the capacity of people to escape the physical constraints which confine them and move into the unfettered realm of vision. Physically expressive of the possibility of uniting heaven and earth, birds become particularly apt symbols for the potential reconciliation between the spirit and the flesh, between a person's "need for some imperishable bliss" and mortality. Yet birds in "Sunday Morning" are used not to demonstrate the interpenetration of the infinite with the finite but to delimit the narrow physical constraints which circumscribe human capacity for vision. In the opening stanza, a young woman sits in "a sunny chair" on a Sunday morning suffused with a sense of sensual well-being yet nonetheless nostalgic for religious experience. The "green freedom of a cockatoo," ironically here a stylized bird embedded in the design of a rug, contributes to the lushness of the setting and helps to dissipate religious inclinations. Yet dreaming, the young woman finds "the bright, green wings" become things in "some procession of the dead" which lead her back to Palestine and a contemplation of the crucifixion. The bird image here is firmly affixed to the secular, its earth-bound and sensual character revealed by its exotic quality, its brightness, and its greenness. Further its ephemeral nature is announced by the presence of those wings in the procession of the dead. That it invites vision is unquestionable, but it is a carefully delimited vision, one which takes place in a procession much like that of a funeral and leads back to a post whose deadness the young woman is only beginning to appreciate. Ironically then the bird image moves the woman to a contemplation of precisely that feature of material reality beyond which she had hoped vision would move her.

In stanza II this earth-bound quality of the bird image and hence of visionary experience is reiterated, the male speaker associating the "bright, green wings" with "comforts of the sun" and asking if these too are not things "to be cherished like the thought of heaven." In any case, he asserts, these transient sensations are all the woman can know of divinity; they are the measures which define her soul. The parameters of the visionary then, he argues, precisely conform to those of sensual experience. By stanza IV the woman is at least partially accepting the male speaker's arguments, imaging earthly satisfactions as "wakened birds" testing the reality of "misty fields." However, her desire for something more lasting

is implied by the spiritualized landscape in which she places these birds. By her mention of "warm fields" which "return no more," a veiled reference to the seasons, she expresses her dissatisfaction with the world of flux and her need for some sustaining permanence, some other-worldly paradise. The male speaker argues, however, that more permanent than her longing for some supernal realm is the cyclic renewal of nature which she deplures, the repetition of "April's green." Further her remembrance of the satisfactions gained from witnessing these patterns of renewal, this "remembrance of awakened birds," of sensual pleasure, is more enduring than any eternal realm she may long for. Indeed her desire for "June and evening," the speaker suggests, indicates the depth of her involvement in this cycle of fertility and death. Her memories and her desires, her experiences of ordinary life are themselves, he says, "tipped/ By the consummation of swallow's wings," brought to an order of completion and rendered perfect by their involvement in this procreative cycle. They are all she needs and all she can experience of permanence.

By stanza VIII the woman has been persuaded, accepting that the tomb in Palestine toward which her reverie had initially drifted is simply a grave. She is thus ready for the final evocation of the natural world, one in which the sensuous details of physical existence are made to stand only for themselves and not for some spiritualized reality. Again bird imagery predominates. However, there is a curious ambiguity about its handling. Birds may well represent the physical constraints which circumscribe man's capacity for vision, but the male speaker no longer finds this a source of consolation. His sun worship in stanza VII, his attempt to organize the natural world into a comforting pattern and cause the hills to echo his hymns of praise, has devolved by stanza VIII into a recognition that "We live in an old chaos of the sun," and an acknowledgement of the fragmented and random quality of life in such a world. So he too expresses some of the woman's longing for order, for the imposition of some meaningful design. The "ambiguous undulations" of the pigeons then become apropos of what Miller has called some "unreconciled tension between the self and the world."<sup>3</sup> The casual flocking of pigeons as well as the "spontaneous cries" of the quail suggest the absence of purpose which the absence of design implies. The undulations of the pigeons suggest a desire to rise above death, their extended wing an attempt to prolong life before the impending darkness. The world may be free from supernatural dominion, but it is a freedom purchased dearly, purchased at the price of meaning which extends beyond physical sensation. Thus the male speaker comes to echo by his equivocation the woman's longing for "some imperishable bliss," her dissatisfaction with a world bounded by her mortality, by "wide water, inescapable."

This ambivalence in "Sunday Morning" is no doubt the product of a deep ambiguity in Stevens himself, the conflict produced between the intensity of his reactions to the natural world and the somber religiosity in his upbringing. "Cathedrals," he had written in an early and somewhat labored sonnet, a piece of juvenilia produced when he was at Harvard, "are not built along the sea."<sup>4</sup> There the melody audible through its organ pipes could only be the "constant murmur of the shore," the "weary eyes" of its worshippers too easily diverted by

"the low and splendid rising of the moon." This impulse then to contrast the richness of the physical world with the gray, shadowy world of the spirit appears early in Stevens and persists. "An old argument with me," he explains in a 1902 journal entry, "is that the true religious force in the world is not the church but the world itself; the mysterious callings of Nature and our responses."<sup>5</sup>

Indeed it is an argument which manifests itself in the typical Sunday activities of his young manhood in New York City, long walks of from ten to twenty-five miles into the Connecticut or New Jersey countryside frequently followed or preceded by an hour spent in church. Initially Stevens had felt himself worshipping at two different altars, finding "in the cathedral . . . one presence; on the highway . . . another."<sup>6</sup> At the one he derived solace from a diminution of the senses, from the "dark corners . . . great nave, quiet lights, remote voice, and soft choir."<sup>7</sup> Nature, on the other hand, excited, its stimulus apparent in the abounding specificity of his journal descriptions, in his tendency to catalogue the flora and fauna he came across. After an outing, he said, "every pound of flesh vibrates with new strength."<sup>8</sup> It was perhaps inevitable then that as his religion became less and less satisfying Stevens would attempt to substitute for faith a kind of pantheism which celebrates immersion in physical sensation, that he would attempt to make of nature a kind of god and of the transience it embodied a kind of virtue. "Sunday Morning" attests eloquently to the failure of those efforts.

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Notes

<sup>1</sup>Wallace Stevens: *Musing the Obscure* (New York: New York University Press, 1967), p. 64.

<sup>2</sup>Beckett, *Wallace Stevens* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 76; Miller, *Poets of Reality* (New York: Atheneus, 1969), pp. 262-263; Weston, *Wallace Stevens: An Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), p. 41.

<sup>3</sup>*Poets of Reality*, p. 284.

<sup>4</sup>According to Holly Stevens in *Souvenirs and Prophecies* (New York: Knopf, 1978), p. 32, the sonnet was written in 1899 and published in the May issue of that year's *Harvard Monthly*.

<sup>5</sup>*Letters of Wallace Stevens*, edited by Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1966), p. 58.

<sup>6</sup>*Letters*, p. 59.

<sup>7</sup>*Letters*, p. 86.

<sup>8</sup>*Letters*, p. 62.

## Affirmative Play/ Playful Affirmation: Stevens' "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven"

THOMAS A. FINK

As J. Hillis Miller, Joseph N. Riddel, Paul Bové, and other distinguished critics have demonstrated, the later poetry of Wallace Stevens lends itself readily and fruitfully to deconstructive analysis.<sup>1</sup> Recognizing this, even such an established Stevens scholar as Harold Bloom has taken pains to account for the deconstructive challenge and to push his own "antithetical" interpretation one step beyond it.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the theoretical formulations to be found in Riddel's essay, "Metaphoric Staging: Stevens' Beginning Again of the 'End of the Book'" (a Derridean title if there ever was one), cogently address areas of difficulty, especially in the long meditative poems of late Stevens, which prior readings have left virtually untouched:

The illogical margin between poetry and philosophy, as Stevens probed it in his later writings, is precisely the figural space where "supreme fictions" are written or figures of presence are inscribed, simulacra of the central identification, which turn out to be doubled and hence aberrational. Philosophy and poetry—always in their way interchangeable, if unequatable, polar fictions—are indeed "supreme fictions" that are written on the margins of two abstract and pure but always unwritten notions called poetry and philosophy, imagination and reality. . . . Poems, which are inscribed in this margin, are always "notes toward" and hence signs that the master text itself, the "extremest book," is composed upon the "eccentric measure" or "aberration" of metaphor and thus composes a "violent abyss" (CP 404). Whether it is the "extremest book" of philosophy or the pure poem of the first idea, they are only texts made up of notes, marginalia. There is no proper word or master text and no master of repetition in this "war" of differences that plays in the margin that we can only call language. For the fiction of the absolute is irreducibly composed out of "every latent double in the word."<sup>3</sup>

Two aspects of the deconstructive enterprise seem particularly relevant to a consideration of Stevens' work. The first, outlined by Riddel in the passage above, locates points at which Stevens exposes the absence of an absolute, a static center, or an overarching coherent structure in his own medium, language, and in experience *per se*. As Bové has shown, the identification of this "event" in the poetry serves to demystify the American "New Critical" tradition's valorization of an exclusive search for formal and thematic unity in literary texts. The second aspect, treated far more sketchily in deconstructive readings of late Stevens, is characterized in an early essay by Jacques Derrida, which speaks of

the Nietzschean *affirmation*, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of

the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation. *This affirmation then determines the noncenter otherwise than as loss of the center.* And it plays without security. . . . In absolute chance, affirmation also surrenders itself to *genetic* indetermina- tion, to the *seminal* adventure of the trace.<sup>4</sup>

The interpretation of signs to which Derrida points is "active" because it does not reify the multi-dimensional *process* of the text; the reader does not pursue a univocal joining of one sign with one fixed referent (or, worse, one whole poem with a fixed referent), but happily accepts the "genetic indetermina- tion" of all signs as an enabling condition for seemingly infinite possibilities of playful, stimulating, and fascinating "troping" or turning of potential significations. Far from mourning the inaccessibility of an unassailable logocentric paradigm, the "active" interpreter eagerly dashes into "the seminal adventure of the trace," the production of a constantly exfoliating, ever more irreducible horde of "meanings" that supplements words whose sole actual unity is their co- presence at a physical "site" on the page.

"An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," the long late poem that Riddel, paraphrasing a comment by Geoffrey Hartman on Derrida, calls "Stevens' own epigrammatology,"<sup>5</sup> is one such "site" where the elaboration of affirmative play and playful affirmation can occur in abundance.<sup>6</sup> The poem opens with an assertion about "ordinary" "seeing" that immediately, in true Stevensian fashion, undergoes a chain of qualifications:

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 . . .

(CP 465)

In the opening line, the word "version," which phonologically resembles "vi- sion," a noun that one might have expected to follow the first two words of the sentence, suggests that we are beginning with an interpretation or copy and not an original "thing." The Latin derivation of "version" gives a sense of "turn- ing" (troping) that marks phenomenological perception, no matter how "plain" or "ordinary," as secondary, mediated vision. This "vulgate," far from making some semblance of the *logos* accessible to a wide audience, is "a thing apart" from any ideal, pristine state of "experience." Next, the "version" is re- vised, troped again by "a few words," the tertiary text of language that supple- ments the eye. The three "and yet's" represent a "never-ending" procession of qualifications, a wandering farther and farther from any inaugural focal point.

The speaker goes on to hint that this errancy of vision/version can be (momentarily) halted by "a recent imagining of reality, // Much like a new

resemblance of the sun . . ." (CP 465). Making images, the creation of "resemblances" (seeming again) in the mind, constitutes the naming of an oxymoronic state, imaginative reality, and when the language calls attention to the state as a "double" or after-effect, the reality in this "seeing" is suddenly engulfed by its fictional status. The words have never ceased "wandering," after all, although the perceiver *desires* and *wills* a gathering of power and insight. As Stevens' speaker notes in section III, "It is desire, set deep in the eye, / Behind all actual seeing, in the actual scene . . ." (CP 467). The "scene" (seen, *a priori* judgment established in the *past*) precedes and thus severely limits "seeing" (the open, impartial *process* of discovery). The will seizes psychological power "behind the scenes," but the words of the poem bring the event out in the open, where one can see that the poles of subjectivity and objectivity are wholly inadequate in the characterization of the individual "vision."

We have come a long way from any naive reading of "the eye's plain version." In section IX, though, the possibility of finding a precise snapshot of "reality" is reconsidered:

We seek

The poem of pure reality, untouched  
By trope or deviation, straight to the word,  
Straight to the transfixing object, to the object

At the exactest point at which it is itself,  
Transfixing by being purely what it is,  
A view of New Haven, say, through the certain eye,

The eye made clear of uncertainty, with the sight  
Of simple seeing, without reflection. We seek  
Nothing beyond reality. Within it,

Everything, the spirit's alchemicana  
Included, the spirit that goes roundabout  
And through included, not merely the visible,

The solid, but the movable, the moment,  
The coming on of feasts and the habits of saints,  
The pattern of the heavens and high, night air.

(CP 471-72)

The verb, "seek" can be viewed simply as the addition of a hard, persistent consonant to the verb, "see." While gesturing *in* language, the speaker implicitly points *outside* language for the answer to his persistent seeking: as the practice of deconstruction reveals, writing is *always* touched "by trope or deviation" from any fixity of signification, and so "the poem of pure reality" is unwritten

and unwriteable. Each time the speaker reformulates a supposed condition of this "supremely fictitious" poem, he underscores the strength of his desire for it and, at the same time, adds "a few words" that alter the fixed conception, cause it to err a little more. The phrases, "straight to the word" and "straight to the transfixing object," are placed in direct apposition to one another, thereby calling attention to the leap from linguistic precision to a visual acuity seemingly elicited by the perceived object's own powerful presence. Despite the juxtaposition, the entire section of the poem contains no evidence for a necessary connection between "word" and "object"; "straightness" leads to two separate paths which never quite cross.

Stevens' earnest seeker desires a vision of "the object// At the exactest point at which it is itself . . ." Is this "point" a specific moment of development or consolidation, a particular spatial location, a metaphysical center that the object's physicality represents, or some or all of these? Language does exactly the opposite of what the speaker wants it to do: rather than fixing or gathering "being," it multiplies and scatters (often conflicting) perspectives on the subject. Verbals like "transfixing" and "being" prove uneasy bedfellows, since one seems active to the point of being violent and the other seems passive; a "point" of reconciliation is never established.

Although the perceiver urgently wishes to banish doubling from his visual experience—"A view of New Haven, say . . . without reflection" (without the doubling of a mirror-image or of thought)—he cannot escape it in his use of words. "The certain eye" is supplemented by "the eye made clear of uncertainty," which calls assured perception into question as a willful sweeping aside of extremely "real" difficulties and complexities. In addition, instead of referring either to "simple sight" or "simple seeing," the speaker includes both nouns in one highly alliterative, double prepositional phrase: "with the sight/ Of simple seeing . . ." Simple indeed!

After striving to narrow perception down to some notion of its purest and simplest element, the speaker concludes section IX by suddenly reversing this movement: "We seek/ Nothing beyond reality. Within it, // Everything . . . not merely the visible . . ." Interestingly, this final call for total inclusivity, slightly over two tercets long, is made in a sentence fragment, the only one in the section. Grammar and rhetoric cancel each other out, and the overall effect of the passage is a momentary but powerful release from limitation, at once cathartic and dizzying. Once the speaker can say that seeing "reality" does "not merely" include "the visible, // The solid," he can imaginatively leap from the physical confines of New Haven to the metaphysical (as well as visual) "pattern of the heavens and high, night air." It is not that some version of reality subsumes "everything"; on the contrary, a swarm of conflicting realities breaks open any stiff conceptual or linguistic container, and the free play of differences prevails.

As he does in many late poems, Stevens employs fundamental binary opposites in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" as beginning points for some of his most adroit and playful troping. Section XV, for instance, relies largely on the poles of substantiality and insubstantiality for its numerous figural transformations:

The instinct for heaven had its counterpart:  
The instinct for earth, for New Haven, for his room,  
The gay tournamonde as of a single world

In which he is and as and is are one.  
For its counterpart a kind of counterpoint  
Irrked the wet wallows of the water-spout.

The rain kept falling loudly in the trees  
And on the ground. The hibernal dark that hung  
In primavera, the shadow of bare rock,

Becomes the rock of autumn, glittering,  
Ponderable source of each imponderable,  
The weight we lift with the finger of a dream,

The heaviness we lighten by light will,  
By the hand of desire, faint, sensitive, the soft  
Touch and trouble of the touch of the actual hand.

(CP 476)

The section continues the description of the quest of New Haven's Professor Eucalyptus begun in the previous canto. This florid scholar manifests a religious devotion to the immediate experience of his environment, the earth, that is both "counterpart" and "counterpoint" to the usual "instinct for heaven." The literal insubstantiality of "heaven" is played phonologically against the literal and figurative palpability of the harsher-vowelled "New Haven," the "refuge" where he listens intently to "the wet wallows of the water-spout" in order to arrive at a "plain version of reality." Unlike Gerard Manley Hopkins, Professor Eucalyptus does not consider "heaven" his desired "haven"; he seeks ultimate reality within an already familiar context, "the gay tournamonde" which signifies not only the world's actual orbit around the sun but the processes of lives *on* that globe.

Originating in winter and continuing during a Botticellian spring, a literally insubstantial darkness termed "the shadow of bare rock," reminiscent of the ominous shadow in Part I of Eliot's "The Waste Land," is magically transformed in autumn (in Eucalyptus' imagination, perhaps) to a "glittering," solid, physical presence—or so it seems. Through a clever etymological pun on the adjectives, "ponderable" and "imponderable," Stevens indicates that "the rock of autumn" is both an imposing, materially weighty presence used as the source of a non-physical (metaphysical or rhetorical) experience—possibly the figuration of absolute certainty—and an intellectually fertile "ground" for abstract meditation about elements that defy metaphysical categorization. If we hold the physical and mental significations in the pun together, a chiasmus (or "double-crossing") results: materially insubstantial thinking is made substantial and the actual materiality of an object is made insubstantial, and in the

countermovement, the *a priori* authority or "solidity" of the ideas is "dissolved" so that the physical substance of the rock can be recognized as bare, unadulterated truth and not as an insubstantial step on the way to a transcendent "Truth."

It is crucial to note that this chiasmus is not a triumph of "New Critical" irony or paradox; the figurations do not freeze conflicting significations into a static unity, in which the rock as a noumenal symbol is both substantial and insubstantial at the same time. Instead, one possible referent for the rock's "materiality" calls another into question, and different referents for "insubstantiality" undermine each other. A coherent interpretation necessarily falsifies any "reasonably" accurate graph of potential signification, since coherence here can only be achieved by balancing a *single* pair of opposites and by suppressing all other possibilities of meaning. A less restrictive understanding of the chiasmus "spotlights" the incompatibilities of divergent readings and, in addition, emphasizes the process of crossing, recrossing, and crossing-out. For the reader, fascination lies in what Paul de Man calls "a great deal of rhetorical agitation"<sup>7</sup> in a few lines of poetry.

Stevens' final thrust in section XV emphasizes the important role that "the hand of desire" plays in the complex process of deriving meanings from texts and from the environment. The mere "finger of a dream," the meeting ground of desire and imagination, overcomes the physical resistance of the ponderous rock—in the mind and, of course, on the page. "Heaviness" turns into airy "heaven-ness," not solely because of the circumstance of figural or phonological play, but because the imaginative "light will" effects an emotional crossing from inanimate materiality to substantive immateriality, if only for a moment. "The soft/ Touch . . . of the actual hand" is a lover's touch; it does not convey the intellectual experience of totalization (through tropes of elevation and the overcoming of gravity) as much as it evokes the imminence of a wholly refreshing breakthrough, a releasing of pressure without attendant strain. Of course, one may also call this movement a "rise" of rhetorical pitch.

Aside from the substantiality/insubstantiality pairing, another binary opposition that allows for abundant play in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven"—as well as many other late poems of Stevens—involves tropes of stasis and process. The highly evocative catalogues of section XXXI, the closing canto of the poem, provide excellent examples of the collision of these opposites:

The less legible meanings of sounds, the little reds  
Not often realized, the lighter words  
In the heavy drum of speech, the inner men

Behind the outer shields, the sheets of music  
In the strokes of thunder, dead candles at the  
window

When day comes, fire-foams in the motions of the  
sea,

Flickings from finikin to fine finikin  
And the general fidget from busts of Constantine  
To photographs of the late president, Mr. Blank,

These are the edgings and inchings of final form,  
The swarming activities of the formulae  
Of statement, directly and indirectly getting at,

Like an evening evoking the spectrum of violet,  
A philosopher practicing scales on his piano,  
A woman writing a note and tearing it up.

It is not in the premise that reality  
Is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses  
A dust, a force that traverses a shade.

(CP 488-89)

Although these “edgings and inchings” are supposed to come to rest in “final form,” permanent stasis, Stevens does not present the realization of this dubious *telos* but the incomplete (and never to be completed) progress toward it. In the literal immobility of the notations printed on them, “sheets of music” do not encompass the “musical” patterns of thunder; they are merely a limited and imperfect supplement to the “notes” of thunder that “play” continually and unpredictably. The “sheets” can be said to embody an achieved stasis, an organic unity, but it is a self-referential one: the process of thunder can never be halted.

If Pater’s vision of the human spirit immersed in aesthetic rapture takes the symbolic form of an eternal “gemlike flame,” Stevens discloses the practical limitations of the symbol by mentioning a “real” candle that has “died.” The small light of the candle’s dwindled wax is replaced by the vast illumination of dawn, which is not necessarily a trope of eternal recurrence but primarily a daily *event*. Similarly, the “fire-foams,” a figurally suggestive joining of the otherwise incompatible fire and water (due solely to the reflection of sunlight on the water’s surface), give a powerful impression of static unity by providing a fixed focal point amid “the motions of the sea”—until clouds and the sun itself shift and destroy the image. The sea, of course, has always been and will always be “in transit.”

The above examples indicate that process is reality and stasis merely a fiction, but process as a *concept* (or as a trope) depends for its existence on its opposite just as much as any notion of stasis depends on the possibility of naming *its* antithesis. The interdependence of the two concepts is subtly conveyed in the playful Stevensian noun “finikin,” which contains both the impression, somewhat diluted, of finality and a finicky quality that rejects every attempt to formulate a final truth. Also, the adjective “fine,” which modifies “finikin” and thus contributes to the “flicking” alliterative effect of the line, suggests its etymological sense of “final” at the same time as it connotes a sense of the “par-

ticular," a quality too delicate and distinct to lump with the heaviness of endings.

Considering how statues are always being mocked, thrown around, or blown up in "An Ordinary Evening" (see sections X, XII, and XXIV), it is hardly a source of reassurance at this point to contemplate the solid constancy of "busts of Constantine." Similarly, static snapshots "of the late president, Mr. Blank" draw a blank when one relies on them to re-present the man as he was when alive and wielding presidential authority. "The general fidget" will not allow the restless perceiver to settle permanently for any particular image of reality; like the author of "this endlessly elaborating poem" (CP 486), he is constantly re-vising.

The philosopher's "scales" may be construed as a fixed metaphysical pattern (and, permitting a pun, as a preordained basis for the "measurement" of justice), and yet, in "practicing scales on his piano," he brings this *a priori* into the imperfect realm of temporality, where its actual presence can only be apprehended part by part, not as a whole. And the woman strives for finality of thought in "writing a note," only to find the conclusiveness "ultimately" unsatisfying enough to warrant tearing up the piece of writing and returning once more to the process.

In the closing tercet of the poem, Stevens, a master of qualifications, is too cautious to come right out and say that transformation (which includes troping) constitutes his "version" of "reality." After pointing out its lack of "solidity," he states that "it may be" two crossings: of shade and dust, and of force and shade. First, the "shade" (if taken as the emergence of a particular color rather than as a protection from sunlight or a ghostly presence) imparts a visual clarity and acuity to the inert, listless "dust," which is as much a sign of the result of dissolution as of a general spiritual torpor. This crossing emphasizes the importance of spatial contiguities and the interactions of various elements in "the eye's" not so "plain version." Next, "force" contributes motion and the expenditure of energy to the predominantly static visual scene.

The counters that Stevens has chosen to represent this double process are general (and, for the most part, ambiguous) enough to allow the reader to bring into play a host of specific substitutions. In closing, I shall mention only one set of possibilities- one which maps out a plausible process of discovery in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." Let us suppose that "dust" signifies the physical presence of the text's printed words, including the divisions of thirty-one sections with six tercets each. The "shade" that "colors" this verbal material is a cluster of the poet's thematic concerns: his preoccupation with definitions of vision and reality, the desire for certainty, resistance to fixity. In turn, this "shade" encounters a powerful "force," the virtually limitless doubling, troping, dispersing free play of signs.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>See Miller, "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure," *Georgia Review*, 30, Nos. 1 and 2 (1976), pp. 5-31, 330-48; Miller, "Theoretical and Atheoretical in Stevens," in Frank Doggett and Robert Buttel, eds., *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 274-85; Riddel, "Metaphoric Staging: Stevens' Beginning Again of the 'End of the Book,'" in Doggett and Buttel, *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*. Bové's chapter on Stevens in *Destructive Poetics: Heidegger and Modern American Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), pp. 181-215, as the book's title indicates, uses a Heideggerian "destructive" analysis to characterize Stevens' poetics, but in practice, the analysis is close (and at several points identical) to Derridean "deconstruction," which Bové invokes at times.

<sup>2</sup>See Bloom, "Coda: Poetic Crossing," *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 375-406.

<sup>3</sup>Riddel, "Metaphoric Staging: Stevens' Beginning Again of the 'End of the Book,'" pp. 324-25.

<sup>4</sup>Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," translated from the French by Alan Bass in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1978, p. 292.

<sup>5</sup>Riddel, "Metaphoric Staging: Stevens' Beginning Again of the 'End of the Book,'" p. 332.

<sup>6</sup>All citations from "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" in Stevens' *Collected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1954) will be cited in the text as *CP* along with the appropriate page reference.

<sup>7</sup>de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 43.

## Prosody and "The Emperor of Ice-Cream": The Elegiac in the Modern Lyric

GABRIELLA BEDETTI

Although literary historians have been interested in defining periods for some time, we are just beginning to explore the phenomenon of change itself, particularly the phenomenon of genre change. Why since the beginning of the romantic movement does the lyric become a major mode whereas two hundred years earlier all major poets were involved in the writing of satiric poems? How do we explain the shifts in formal structure and the subsiding of the lyric mode in the modern period? Such questions cannot be answered by looking at a single poem, yet taking a "visual" poem and arguing for its temporal dimension would acknowledge our awareness of the connectedness of concepts of space and concepts of time, even of time's circularity. The prosody of a short Stevens poem enables me to illustrate the double vision of the modern poet. On the one hand, "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" has a speaker confronting a corpse and making a narrative out of the act, and, on the other, the poem expresses the impossibility of arresting a moment in time.<sup>1</sup> Trying to duplicate the moment seems harder for Stevens than it was for a poet like Emerson, who believed in transcendence. Faith in the lyric depends on a prelapsarian vision. Because the poet no longer trusts that vision, the rules for the lyric have changed; as Stevens discovers he is temporal, as his attempt to find the moment turns into a lyric about memory, the poem raises the question of whether it is possible for a modern poet to write a lyric poem and moves toward a union of lyric and narrative modes. "Emperor" becomes an ironic elegy for the same strained modes of rendering the world it has taken up with. Only in this way can the poem's bipartite structure—the reflexive melodrama of competing and depleted modes—justify our attention.

Readers tend to think of "Emperor" as an unfolding scenario. Most readings speak of the poem as a scene to be decoded, thereby focusing critical attention on the poem's images. To William Burney, "everything in the scene is rapidly breaking up or wearing away."<sup>2</sup> Rather than split the poem into a series of images as if to edit subsequent frames of a film, I show how the local effects have their precision and importance within the poet's moving situation. In the process of showing, as well, how the poem's narrative takes on direction and meaning through its bipartite form, I explain why the second stanza leaves us feeling less satisfied than the first. The way a resistant prosody plays against the narrating speaker implies a relationship between the two parts that is not merely sequential but also contradictory or double. Though a series of spontaneous events are coerced into a narrative frame, the last act is performed by a self-acting lamp, independent of external exigencies. The poem's action is thus the opposition between illusion and reality, and the "twoness" of the stanzas bespeaks that action.

There are infinite ways of enacting the general theme of the concupiscence of life in relation to its destitution, but the conventions finely assist Stevens to attain his enactment. We can consider, first of all, the stanza and the use of stan-

zaic division to enact a logical shift in focus. It is a stanza consisting of a six-line unit and a couplet. Like the Shakespearean sonnet, the stanza itself, with its six lines of preparation followed by its couplet of climax, release, and commentary, constitutes a paradigm of inflation and deflation, or of the heroic which swells and swells until it bursts into the mock-heroic. Although this stanza's association with the Shakespearean sonnet suggests a powerful form, instead of the more intense release and resolution of a closing sestet, Stevens chooses the bipartite structure of a caudated sonnet.

The conventional accumulation of weight at the ends of lines in stanzas assists both Stevens and the reader to schematize the bipartite experience. The unequal, closed couplets at the end of each stanza provide closure for their respective stanzas, even though by way of a repetitious rhyme (*seem, ice-cream; beam, ice-cream*). Just to pronounce the rhymes alone is to trace the action of the poem: we can surely deduce a darkening from the first stanza's *seem, ice-cream* to the second stanza's *come, dumb, beam, ice-cream*. And the convention that the terminal position in the line is the all-important one is what, in line 5 and in the substitution of a pyrrhic for an iambic foot at the end of line 6, gives the synoptic trace of something like the action of the poem even more clarity: the rhythmic variety of *boys, newspapers* (where the terminal *s* sounds echo each other but not in a self-conscious manner) contracts to the deprivation of *come, dumb*.

The metrical convention adds further density to the proceedings. The meter of the poem is rising four-stress accentual with the number of syllables per line varying from seven to fourteen:

|   | syllables | feet |
|---|-----------|------|
| Cáll thě/ róllěr    ǒf bíg/ cígárs, /               | 8         | 4    |
| Thě mús/cúlār óne,    ǎnd bíd/ hím whíp/            | 9         | 4    |
| Īn kít/chěn cúps    cǒncúp/ĭscěnt cúrds./           | 9         | 4    |
| Lét thě/ wénchēs    dǎwdlě/ ĩn sũch dréss/          | 9         | 4    |
| Ās thěy/ ǎre úsed/ tǒ wéar,    ǎnd lét/ thě bóys/   | 10        | 5    |
| Brńng flówěrs/ ĩn lást/ mǒnth's néws/ pǎpěrs./      | 9         | 4    |
| Lét bé/ bě fĭn/ále/ ǒf séem./                       | 8         | 4    |
| Thě ón/lỹ ém/pěřǒr ís/ thě ém/pěřǒr ǒf/ íce-crěam./ | 14        | 6    |
|   |           |      |
| Táke frǒm/ thě drés/sěř ǒf déal,                    | 7         | 3    |
| Láckńng/ thě thrée/ gláss knóbs,    thǎt shéet/     | 8         | 4    |
| Ōn whĭch shé/ ěmbroi/děred fán/tails ónce/          | 9         | 4    |
| Ānd spréad/ ĩt só/ ǎs tǒ có/věř hěř fáce./          | 10        | 4    |
| Íf hěř/ hórńỹ/ féet prǒtrúde,    thěy cóme/         | 9         | 4    |
| Tǒ shów/ hǒw cóld/ shě ís,    ǎnd dúmb./            | 8         | 4    |
| Lét thě lǎmp/ ǎffĭx/ ĩts béam./                     | 7         | 3    |
| Thě ón/lỹ ém/pěřǒr ís/ thě ém/pěřǒr ǒf/ íce-crěam./ | 14        | 6    |

More particularly, the poem's opening quatrain echoes the stable unitary prosody of Old English verse, though not in an excessively self-conscious manner: 1) four

strongly stressed syllables, 2) two hemistiches of two stresses each, and 3) stressed syllables frequently alliterating. The ghost of alliterative meter within these lines, based both on quantity and stress-accent, seeks possibilities of resonance that, according to C. S. Lewis, have not been exploited for a thousand years.<sup>3</sup> The remaining lines echo this meter through alliterative half-lines and a stairlike alliteration overlapping lines:

Call the roller of *big* cigars,  
The muscular one, and *bid* him whip  
In *KIT*chen *CUPS* con*CUP*iscent *CURDS*.  
Let the *wenches* *DAW*dle in such *DRESS*  
As they are used to *wear*, and *let* the boys  
Bring flowers in last month's newspapers.  
Let *BE BE* finale of seem.  
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Take from the *DRES*ser of *DEAL*,  
Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet  
On which she embroidered *fantails* once  
And *SPREAD* it *SO* as to cover her face.  
If her *horny feet* protrude, they come  
To show how *cold* she is, and *dumb*.  
*LET* the *LAMP* affix its beam.  
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

As the alliterative meter aims at richness and fullness of sound, what Lewis compares to "carving in granite," so does the poem's double lexicon supplement a plain but strong medieval Anglo-Saxon diction (*curds, wenches, deal*) with a more ornate latinate diction (*concupiscent, embroidered, affix, finale, emperor*). Two elements—the base iambic meter and bipartite stanzaic division—are what make the poem's local effects take on direction and meaning as details of a resistant prosody shoulder the narrative.

As the poem's speaker expresses a definable attitude, he is shaping the narrative. The speaker is seen extending directives to the audience; his voice, like that of a carnival barker, invincible and persuasive, initiates activity, as indicated by the initial trochees in lines 1 and 4 of the first stanza, where this substitution is made to coincide with an active verb in the imperative mode. The illusion of sheer physical power is compounded by the sudden force of initial spondees substituted in lines 6 and 7. Revelling in the illusionistic world he has constructed, the speaker flaunts a control emphasized by the ripple of *l*'s and beginning-and-end-of-line *a*'s, as well as by the assonance of *i*'s, especially to underscore the fullness of the first three line endings. In stanza two, however, the number and rapidity of imperatives is reduced from five in the first stanza to three in the second; the speaker shifts from three imperative *let*'s in the first stanza to one *let* in stanza two; and he moves from two line initial *let*'s in the first stanza to one in the second, where the poet attends a scene focusing on the corpse itself rather

than on the speaker's control of the celebration. It is not the speaker involved in the narrative motion who feels the falling off of exhortation: the speaker maintains his initial tone, while the poet hears the falling off in terms of prosody. He hears the latinate diction which had contributed to the first stanza's fullness decrease in the second stanza, just as he hears the Old English alliterative meter become dispersed in half-lines and stairlike alliteration. Even as he speaks the couplet, "If her horny feet protrude, they come/ To show how cold she is and dumb," the barker's cheerful hortatory tone regarding the funeral rites suppresses the references to sexual arousal and release while it highlights her absolute passivity (emphasized by the unvarying iambic tetrameter) in face of his activity. Although it is the speaker through whom the last directive is given, the poet's self-awareness leads him to deflect the final command to an inanimate object (the lamp). Though the longer last line in the uneven couplet carries the moment of greatest dramatic weight, the speaker is no longer center stage. Transcendental completeness eludes his attempt to find the moment, and the writing slides into a lyric about memory, witness to the presence that is vanishing, to the tide coming in at low ebb.

I have looked at the poem as object, describing first its prosody and then its narrative. Some readers, by contrast, claim that modern literature tends to offer only spatial constructs. According to Joseph Frank, for example, it is modern literature itself which "undermined the inherent consecutiveness of language, frustrating the reader's normal expectation of sequence and forcing him to perceive the elements of the poem as juxtaposed in space rather than unrolling in time."<sup>4</sup> And, in fact, that is what many readers see when they look at one of Stevens' shorter poems; Stuart Silverman observes "Emperor" as a spatial entity: "One must read as though suspended above the poem, simply allow the sensations emanating from it to flow into one and wait for the ordering principle to arrive and give them meaning. When that happens, one sees the poem as a spatial entity, not a sequence."<sup>5</sup> I differ from Silverman in believing that prosodic details interact with the narrative sequence. As in a sonnet, the "with a tail" sestet works with the octave. Stevens uses the stanza in a highly organic way. The moment of greatest dramatic weight—and often of grammatical weight as well—is the weightier last line of each stanza. Thus the only hexameter line in a stanza with a tetrameter base establishes an irony which the subsequent hexameter line will echo and parallel. The irony generated from the second hexameter results from the opposition between the length of the line, on the one hand, and, on the other, the experience of absence expressed by the speaker. It is as if the very line length were exposing his resistance to the claim of life's destitution, the terminal amphibrach reminding the reader rhythmically of the sound of the classic heroic hexameter, the traditional medium of old-style epic.

In the first stanza, moreover, although we begin in the imperative mode, we are shifted to a predicament in the "heavy" but declarative eighth line. The shift in mode coincides with the emotional shift or "turn" occurring between stanzas by which the poet enables himself to take an enlarged view of his subject—the concupiscence of life. Thus in stanza two, power does not accumulate; it diminishes. The poet who wanted to sustain the speaker's gaiety now listens to the

stanza's opening lines in their frothiness. He hears the imperatives of stanza one replaced by an increasing number of declarative clauses in the indicative mode. With the absence of a foot to emphasize the contraction of possibility, the possibility of *be* of line 7 becomes the reduction of *be* of line 15. The alliterative meter of stanza one deflates into the spare monosyllables and end-rhyme of a slower second stanza. In line 15 Stevens hears the early alliteration of *k* soften to alliteration of *l* at the same instant that he hears the third line initial *let* and the diction (*affix*) turn the lamp into a self-operating agent. In the poem's penultimate line, the poet thus observes a self-creation of light. The *let* becomes less an imperative in the ears of the listening poet than a synonym for "allow" or "permit." The last line self-destructs for the poet. The final accent is on the penultimate syllable. Any other emperor would be self-deceiving.

The retrospective element following the first couplet's closure makes the poet feel time-bound. While the narrative speaker never lapses from his buoyant, defiant, hortative tone, Stevens as poet feels a reduction in the need for exhortation. Although the speaker drives toward the third couplet's finality, the poet notices how each step is both a relinquishing of the self and a prologue in the succession of present moments. He interacts both with the didactic narrative and with the mock-heroic prosody. He enjoys *and* understands the speaker's irreverence for the conventional myths of death and afterlife. Despite the dissolution of alliterative meter and hortative tone occurring with and against the bipartite form, the poet still enjoys the gaudiness of his chosen style. Thus "Emperor" is seen dramatizing the fact that the moment we posit an attainment, it is retrospective and contains an element of the elegiac. While stanza one renders the experience of desire and enjoyment, in the second stanza the poet recognizes the mask of willfulness chosen to try to do the work of the imagination. In this duet between undertaker and angel, the way prosody undercuts the narrative action makes one aware both of the speaker's will for finality and of the poet's tacit vigilance. Like a strutting fantail, the speaker delights in his jocular procreation, but the poet finds it hard to realize self-possession as he observes the plainness of deal, the absence of the glass knobs, and the protrusion of feet. Stevens isolates a moment of pure fertility in the first stanza and enjoys the here and now. In the presence of the corpse and with the decreation of the heroic manner, however, the poet begins to sense the arbitrariness of isolated moments as perfect since one is born and dies with each new naming.

Like Crispin's nostalgic quest for the "veritable ding an sich," Stevens' reaching for established structures in this poem's meter and form and then relinquishing them describes an important quality of the modern poet: a nostalgia for the purity of the lyric voice which stems from language's traditionally logocentric desire to name something that never could be named. Poets as diverse as Frost and Rilke have allowed the same question to be raised as each has experienced the difficulty of arresting a moment in time. In the *Elegies* Rilke adjusts to the difficulty of communicating with the angels—of achieving transcendence—by using a conventional allegory to resolve the sequence's dramatic situation. And despite Merwin's extraordinary lyricism, he admits, "Whatever I talk about is yesterday/ by the time I see anything it is gone."<sup>6</sup> Stevens seemed to think that

this doubleness is essential to poetry. He selected "Emperor" from his poems as his favorite because it "wears a deliberately commonplace costume, *and yet* seems to me to contain something of the essential gaudiness of poetry." He re-iterates the poem's evasiveness or duplicity in remarking that "concupiscent curds express the concupiscence of life, *but by contrast* with the things in relation in the poem, they express or accentuate life's destitution" (my emphases). What gives these words "more than a cheap lustre," what enables the poem to be at once about "being as distinguished from seeming to be" is the poet's implicit acceptance of the double vision.<sup>7</sup> Thus the gaudiness that is the very life of poetry and its "pleasure of merely circulating" is set against the fact that the lyric voice, the grounding origin of poetry, appears only by being already entombed in poetry itself.<sup>8</sup>

Suspicion regarding the poem's falsely elegant language therefore originates in the poet's way of listening to the poem, as detailed in the prosody's resistance to the speaker's movement. Stevens' separation from a self-indulgent speaker making absurd assertions right to the end articulates his deepest sense of experience. The speaker's will for unity of self and object and the poet's tacit vigilance result in a third tone that is aware of both, recognizes the unreality behind the heroic manner, and critiques the fictitiousness of extracting anything from reality, holding it up, and longing for it. The double perception of attainment and separation, of enjoyment and absence, enables the reader to know the doubleness of Stevens' poem, an act only fully articulate in its antithetical moment. More than a double voice which feels and desires to sustain that feeling, the whole poem is both a speaking and an aside, a desire for transcendence and the realization that transcendence involves "both aspiration and inspiration," both will and imagination. Beyond its elegant surface, "Emperor" is a serious poem about the condition of enjoyment, about the way it seeks repetition of pleasure and the way its attainment contains the elegiac. Though the poem cannot escape the nostalgia of its prosodic norm, it uses that nostalgia to disclose the metaphoricality of its desire. The elegiac transforms the lyric by undermining major conventions of harmony and oneness; its way of drawing the poem towards a union of two major modes—the lyric and the narrative—suggests the multidimensional nature of transformatory principles as writers alter a genre. For Stevens, at least, being whole required being double. Prosody holds in check the windy monologist-speaker's impulse to exteriorize the self, to bring everything to the surface. Rather than prolong the feeling, fueling it with repetition and accretion, instead of the barker's dominance and possession, Stevens gives a quality of listening such that the ice in ". . . emperor of ice-cream" makes itself heard through his listening, so that reality is understood to be the indispensable element of an irreducibly figurative language. By arguing for a double vision of life rather than straining for a traditional transcendence, Stevens operates over and above the power controls of society. The elegiac as a structure thereby becomes an instrument of resistance and change and calls for the hope (utopian or not) of our escape from power.<sup>9</sup>

Notes

<sup>1</sup>Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1954), p. 64.

<sup>2</sup>William Burney, *Wallace Stevens* (New York: Twayne, 1968), p. 58.

<sup>3</sup>C. S. Lewis, "The Alliterative Meter," in *Selected Literary Essays* (Cambridge: University Press, 1969), pp. 15-26.

<sup>4</sup>Joseph Frank, *The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1963), p. 10.

<sup>5</sup>Stuart Silverman, "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," *Western Humanities Review*, 26 (1972), 168.

<sup>6</sup>W. S. Merwin, "Talking," in *Opening the Hand* (New York: Atheneum, 1983), p. 24.

<sup>7</sup>*Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1966), pp. 500, 341.

<sup>8</sup>Michael Beehler, "Demystified Nostalgia: Re-turning in Stevens' Last Poems," Twentieth Century Literature Conference, Louisville, 25 Feb. 1982.

<sup>9</sup>I owe thanks to Alan Nadel and Paul Fussell, who commented on this paper at the Mid-Hudson MLA and the MLA, respectively.

## Stevens' Good Black Humor Man

ROBERT F. FLEISSNER

Since Stevens' "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" deserves a certain place of honor among explicators, if only because the poet himself wrote *The Explicator* about it,<sup>1</sup> special care is needed to get the nuances precisely right. Although his own surprisingly liberal attitude toward interpretation<sup>2</sup> would allow for Shirley H. Strobel's views in a recent *Explicator* article, she bypasses major facets of this "death poem" which deserve reconsideration.

For it is such a poem, not only owing to the corpse described but because of the last line in each stanza, which refers to the grim ruler reigning over mortality. Two common synonyms for death personified are "King of terrors" and "King of Death," and *Emperor* is a political variant of *King*.<sup>3</sup> Stevens realized full well that such a gloss was valid.<sup>4</sup> Strobel's opinion that the key line implies that "life is to be enjoyed—before the delicious ice cream melts" is a purely surface one, ignoring latent irony in the line and thus belittling the overall impact. The imagery does deal with transitory delights, yet the stress is on *transitory*, the point being that they eventually lead to death, are unending.

Psychologically, the overtones of "ice-cream" in this context chime more with death than life. Almost automatically O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* offers an analogy, the titular figure likewise personifying death, and the biblical resonance in the archaic "Cometh" recalling the echo of "Let there be light" in Stevens' preceding "stage direction": "Let the lamp affix its beam."<sup>5</sup> Associations with *ice* are cold and shivery. Although Stevens once reflected that his ending implies that "icecream is an absolute good,"<sup>6</sup> he qualified this dictum strongly. On one hand, his very next statement was that "the poem is obviously not about icecream, but about being as distinguished from seeming to be"; on the other, in a letter of his which only recently was published, he analyzed the poem in detail, confessing: "Not that I wish to exalt ice cream as an absolute good, although my little girl might."<sup>7</sup> (His daughter, Holly, it should be added, was born two years after the fact.) To avoid any contradiction, we might best see the last line as grotesquely ironic, the overseer of melting sweetness being the Great Leveler.

Strobel's reference to "The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream" as "lilting" therefore hardly faces the issue, especially the *frisson* experienced by the reader. The best argument against the judgment that the poetic point is in the hedonism of this dramatic line is that, in the first stanza, the image is preceded by the caveat "Let be be finale of seem," which could be reminiscent of Hamlet's comment on his father's death: "Seemes Madam? Nay, it is: I know not Seemes" (I.ii.76). In a word, reality supersedes the merely apparent. If, immediately afterwards, Stevens' speaker were to *defend* the "pleasures" of appearance as such, as symbolized in the lapping of ice cream, the effect would be not only comical but downright absurd.

It follows that the contextual signification of "ice-cream" can only be figurative (unlike the curds mentioned), probably amusing in the sense of *Galgenhumor*,

with "emperor" conveying its own rather spine-chilling nuances. What most probably was the basic genesis for the line bears out this conclusion. Again, it is in *Hamlet*; the Prince, in speaking of the dead body of Polonius, replies sneeringly to his uncle, "Your worm is your onely Emperor for diet" (IV.iii.21).<sup>8</sup> This curious gastronomical assessment could have appealed to Stevens because of its own subliminal meaning, its subtle historical allusion to the Diet of Worms (implied as well in the immediately preceding "convocation of politick wormes"). Is it not, finally, somewhat awkward to believe that Stevens transformed his source(s) to such an extent that the effect of Death's having the last snicker would have got lost?

Central State University, Ohio

Notes

<sup>1</sup>Wallace Stevens, "On the Poem 'Ice Cream' and the 'Meaning' of Poetry," *The Explicator*, 7 (November, 1948), p. 18.

<sup>2</sup>In his letter to R. S. Blackmur, cited by Holly Stevens in "Flux," *Southern Review*, 15 (1979), pp. 771-774, Stevens writes, *à propos* of this poem, "For the life of me, I don't, in any case, see why a poem should not mean one thing to one person and something else to another." See Shirley H. Strobel, *The Explicator*, 41, 4 (Summer, 1983), pp. 33-35.

<sup>3</sup>Martin Seymour-Smith, in *Who's Who in Twentieth Century Literature* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977), p. 353, notes that "Ice-cream" is homophonic with "I scream," hence terror.

<sup>4</sup>See Richard Ellmann, "Wallace Stevens' Ice-Cream," *The Kenyon Review* (Winter, 1957), 89-105. Stevens relished all the ado about whether his ending signified death or life.

<sup>5</sup>Since the play was composed many years after the poem, it is tempting to consider that O'Neill was inspired in part by Stevens. In turn, one of the sources for the poem could have been *The Emperor Jones*, also ending in death, written the preceding year and performed after a Stevens play. See Celeste Turner Wright, "Stevens and the Black Emperor of Key West," *Arizona Quarterly*, 35 (1979), 65-76.

<sup>6</sup>*Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 341.

<sup>7</sup>See the letter to Blackmur cited by Holly Stevens in "Flux" (note 2 above).

<sup>8</sup>See my source-study, "Stevens in Wittenberg: 'The Emperor of Ice-Cream,'" *Research Studies* (Washington State University), 42 (1974), pp. 256-260.

## Limitation and Amusement in "Depression Before Spring"

ASHBY BLAND CROWDER

"Poor, dear, silly Spring, preparing her annual surprise!"

—Wallace Stevens, Journal entry for March 4, 1906<sup>1</sup>

We all experience "Depression Before Spring"—for Winter always goes on too long, and Spring seems too slow in coming. In "Depression Before Spring," Wallace Stevens gives voice to our common complaint. The cock, which always crows before dawn, is used here to anticipate Spring; but the cock's reminder of what *is* to come merely accentuates what has *not* in fact come and so frustrates the poem's speaker. Bestowing the not-yet-born Spring with mythic embodiment, the speaker laments the delay of Proserpine: ". . . no queen rises."<sup>2</sup>

Frank Doggett explains the relationship between the central images of the poem—the cock, Spring, and the queen—in the following way: "The crow of the cock . . . carries an echo of the idea of the procreative urge," and there is "in the desire of male for female an analogy to the desire of life for springtime."<sup>3</sup> The poem's central analogy might be represented thus:

Life desires Spring  
as  
Cock desires hen  
as  
Man desires woman.  
But no spring-hen-woman responds.

Yet Doggett does not explain the second stanza containing the "blonde" with "dazzling hair," nor does he adequately explain the "Ho! Ho!" which constitutes the third stanza.

I think we can assume that the speaker of this poem anticipates Spring because of the hints of its advent. And, as I have noted, this Spring is anticipated as a woman in *two* senses, as a woman desired by a man, and as a woman *per se* (a spontaneously anticipated mythic creature). It would seem, then, that when the perceiver says,

The hair of my blonde  
Is dazzling,  
As the spittle of cows  
Threading the wind[,]

he is anthropomorphically observing only the small aspect of Spring that is yet in evidence; tantalized by her flowing hair, he desires to capture her essence with

a bold metaphorical gesture, knowing that the only way he can get beyond appearances is to see with a perceptive simile. This method, however, does not always work, as when Stevens says in his *Journal*, "I noticed the way patches of trees stood on hill-sides, and couldn't think even of a simile. Then I found some pussy willows, the first of the year—and some yellow river willows. Everything was dull and hard and tiresome."<sup>4</sup> I believe Stevens' persona in "Depression Before Spring" is writing of the same sort of failure of the imagination. In order to assist his partial vision of Spring, he manages a simile. But rather than sweetening the scent of Spring, his simile portrays the disillusioning awareness of a lingering Winter wind (no typical spring breeze has the force to bear aloft cow spittle), and his effort falls grotesquely flat. Therefore, he laughs away his failure: "Ho! Ho!"

"But no queen comes/ In slipper green," and he is powerless to force reality with his imagination. He must, then, wait—depressed, and relieved only by an outburst of amusement over his limitations.

Hendrix College

Notes

<sup>1</sup>Holly Stevens, *Souvenirs and Prophecies: The Young Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), p. 162.

<sup>2</sup>All citations are to *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), p. 63.

<sup>3</sup>Frank Doggett, *Stevens' Poetry of Thought* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), p. 22.

<sup>4</sup>Holly Stevens, p. 158.

## Poems

### It Must Be A Fluent Mundo

A fleeting scene,  
our poeted orb:  
abstract, supreme,  
slipper green,  
finale of seem.

Perhaps an actor twanging,  
or sleights of sails,  
or deer upon our mountains—  
gestures of the possible,  
possible.

A moment of awakening,  
a spontaneous stop.  
Then turn the phrase,  
revolve the word.  
The emperor of ice-cream whirls.

Drink Meursault  
in Catawba crystal.  
Celebrate sublime.  
Fat girl sips, spins,  
then distorts and dangles down  
with exquisite undulations  
of poetic pleasure.

David P. Rosen  
Temple University

## Concordance Browsing

For voyeurs,  
For seekers of private windows  
Into a poet's mind  
Concordances are custom made.

Pick a subject for concordance peeping.  
Say Wallace Stevens,  
Most private of Yankee poets,  
His shades subtly drawn.

In hundreds of dazzling lines  
Of this Connecticut WASP  
You stumble on seven (!) *rabbis*.  
A puzzling choice.

Another W.S.—  
The all-time champion—  
Had none,  
Not even in Venice.

But let us start with A.  
*Aspic*. Twice, both bitter.  
(Same as the other W.S.  
In number and astringency).

To most rabbis  
(Orthodox  
Or Reformed),  
*Aspic* is what you eat carp in.

Stevens' rabbis  
(No Reformed or Orthodox  
At the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company)  
Would only carp about *aspic*.

They would not eat it.  
Nor would their poet.  
What does this tell you about Stevens?  
Keep browsing.

**"Pure Scientist, You Look With Nice Aplomb"**

from "Good Man, Bad Woman"  
by Wallace Stevens

I, the scientist  
Read these words  
And snort  
Without aplomb.

Today  
Is any scientist  
Pure?  
Especially to poets?

Is aplomb  
Ever nice  
To the spectator  
Hiding envy?

Is aplomb  
Even nice  
To a coyly fastidious  
Elizabethan?

Nice is never nice  
To the etymologist.  
Nice is foolish, reticent,  
Or at best punctilious.

Poet—don't you know  
There are as few scientists  
With aplomb  
As there are poets?

## Vocalissima

"What syllable are you seeking,  
Vocalissimus,  
In the distances of sleep?  
Speak it!"  
—Wallace Stevens, "To the Roaring Wind"

Vocalissimus Stevens! Or is it Wallace Vocalissimus?  
Tell me. What familiarity do you permit?

You wrote about women:  
sweet smelling virgins; trembling ladies; peached and ivory wenches;  
beautiful bareness and sinewy nakedness;

You called them:  
*Liebchen, mon bijou, mon extase*; even a pearly poetess.

You named them:  
Carlotta, Eulalia and Flora;  
Marianna, Bawda and Susanna  
Bonnie and Vincentine (lean, heavenly Vincentine).

More formally:  
Mrs. Anderson, Mrs. Dooley, Mrs. Pappadopoulos.

Was there a Vocalissima?

I knew one  
Who knew you.  
After your death, she lived with you  
Three long years, day in, day out,  
She learned by heart each word you wrote.  
She knew your rose rabbi, your dark rabbi,  
your doctor of Geneva,  
even your uncle with a monocle  
(*Monsieur, excusez la traduction anglaise,  
Mais elle ne parle pas comme une Française.*)

Afterwards she collected a few men,  
Then many,  
Then only one—a modern alchemist.  
If he had been a Vocalissimus,  
(rose or dark; with or without a monocle)  
Would she be here now?

But he  
Master of chemical mutations,  
Whose alchemy touched millions,  
Could not transform her,  
Nor transform himself.

Vocalissime! Speak it!  
How does a modern alchemist  
Transmute himself  
Into a Vocalissimus?

Carl Djerassi  
Department of Chemistry  
Stanford University

## ANNOUNCEMENT

### Wallace Stevens Society

#### 1984 MLA Program

December 28, 1984  
3:30-5:30 p.m., Baltimore, Sheraton  
Washington, D.C.

Chair: John N. Serio  
Clarkson University

1. "Something for Nothing: Paradox and Negation in Stevens' 'Complicate' Poetics," Barbara M. Fisher, City College, City University of New York
2. "The Strategy of Smallness in Wallace Stevens and Emily Dickinson," Fred Miller Robinson, University of Massachusetts, Amherst
3. "Beyond *Harmonium*: Reading Stevens and Bishop," Joanne Feit Diehl, University of California, Davis
4. "Getting the World Right: Stevens, Science, and the American Context," Lisa M. Steinman, Reed College

**Notes Toward the Paisant Myth**  
for Wallace Stevens

I

We must fix the figures, or find the thing, violet  
And true as night, the thing that will suffice, a tune  
Perhaps, music for a blue rain, an empty bed.  
Nodding Wallace, nap no more for  
We've both become frightfully like that high-toned old  
Christian woman. We must fix the figures. Listen  
To my purple words, our minds' iodine, and rise.  
So we go to set our lands in order. Learn how that  
Logos and logic, the crystal hypothesis,  
Quietly creeps, hiding from our feeble Supreme  
Fictions; the faithful Laocoon vainly sprinkling  
Blood of insipid bovine before fictive gods,  
Fated futility. O men of Connecticut,  
Why do you sing of the peignoir and cockatoo?

II

The major man cannot stand and will not do.  
The noble MacCullough aspires to greater  
Aptitude and apprehension, clothing himself  
In lofty imagination's pied finery,  
Even as myopic man is lost, searching for  
The drip-dry soul; lost, unable to cope with the  
Prickly hair shirts of the psyche; mute beau linguist.  
Notre dame, sing for this poor man hopeful songs.  
Those ornate artists of empty apotheosis,  
Though less guilty, and believers in man's role  
As harlequin in a human comedy, how  
Tragic, toy with Santayana soliloquies,  
Fools fooling with universe dice, finding nothing,  
Nobody; artistic sequestration from truth.

### III

The principle and particle of the matter,  
No need to nimbly tread upon that soggy  
Metaphysical turf, lies not exclusively  
In some Sunday morning sepulchre first and last  
Phenomenon; indeed, it certainly must bleed.  
True as night, these things will suffice: violet  
Music of Friday noon and Thursday eve, purple  
And gore, Brebeuf, Campion and More; men who  
Sweat red, deny and outrage kings. Though now long dead,  
Their oozing blood, a commingling baptismal,  
Staunches all disbelief. Epistemology  
Now obsolete, because a solitary dove  
Floats over the glittering lamp-lit cities,  
Soaring, circling bright-winged; and the blood oozes still.

Michael Suarez  
Le Moyne College

## Reviews

### **A Thought to be Rehearsed: Aphorism in Wallace Stevens's Poetry.**

Beverly Coyle, Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983.

I first encountered this book five years ago in its dissertation form and was struck by how refreshing a study it was; Beverly Coyle's detailed, lucid explications clarified Stevens' stylistic development without assembling such an intricate critical scaffolding that the critic obscured the poetry. Coyle has since revised her study slightly, permitting an expanded treatment of Stevens' later, longer poems, and her work is now published as number nine of *Studies in Modern Literature*, A. Walton Litz, general series editor. Fortunately, "A Thought To Be Rehearsed All Day" still clarifies the structure and meaning of Stevens' poetic methods without reducing the poetry to her thesis. That virtue is Coyle's reward for knowing Stevens' texts so well that she was able to select a specific stylistic element— as opposed to imposing an abstract critical category— that embodies the movement of language and thought in individual poems throughout the poet's career. In short, we sense that Coyle does not so much argue for an ingenious vantage point that she has discovered in Stevens. Rather, she explains a point of contact that amplifies what the poems say for themselves.

This study demonstrates that aphorism "is a basic unit of expression in Stevens' poetry" (p. 1) and that the interactions between aphorisms and their surrounding poetic contexts (which includes other aphorisms) create the play between ideas formed by the imagination and more concrete sensations dictated by the flux of reality. Guiding her work by several succinct definitions of aphorism and its functions, Coyle explains that "the function of aphorism in poetry is not to capture permanently or didactically some absolute unity, but to give imaginative man a momentary hold on an aspect of experience through the power of his own expression" (p. 23). She then summarizes Stevens' primary aim both as aphorist and poet:

to present himself as imaginative man reflecting upon his ideas, penetrating through them to expose their tentativeness (and that of all ideas), and yet at the same time affirming the paradoxical whole that can be mediated from such fragments (p. 25).

As these conclusions suggest, Coyle is concerned more with Stevens' way of thought than with his conclusions; that orientation combined with her topic and her devotion to explicating whole poems, not just the helpful passages, results in such dramatic cases of Stevens' developments in style and theme that we are not only convinced of her thesis, we also pause over the issues this book glances at but does not pursue.

Right away, Coyle advises us to "shift the focus of concern [in defining aphorism] away from an emphasis upon content to an emphasis on the formulation . . . a reader responds to a statement as an aphorism because its formal and thematic elements create in him a sense of closure" (pp. 2 and 3). Those elements are carefully identified (syntax, prosody, predeterminate effects), preparing the way for Coyle's key insight into the relationship between aphorism and context: she suggests a "phenomenological implication" (p. 13) in the way aphorisms function, which is that they carry both centripetal and centrifugal force. While we expect a statement marked by closure to "pull experience into a self-contained unit" (p. 25), we must recognize that Stevens' aphorisms are also centrifugal, or "projective" (p. 14); they merely pique the reader's desire for closure and compel him to seek the surrounding context for a more comprehensive closure. In the tension between centripetal and centrifugal forces, Coyle claims, lies "the overall rela-

tionship between Stevens's theory of imaginative expression and this aphoristic mode': the fragmentlike nature of experience inclines us to pull discrete perceptions into self-contained units, a centripetal tendency. But we also crave order and perceive resemblance, so we invariably "experience life as a complex series of interacting congeries," a reflection that "leads Stevens to refuse final commitment to any one group of fragments . . ." (p. 25).

Critical framework in place, Coyle then successfully traces Stevens' poetic career according to the ways distinct aphorisms are integrated into whole poems. Beginning with the pre-*Harmonium* poem-suites, we find the poet working with the relationship between general statement and concrete experience. The "contrapuntal-complementary relationships between poems" (p. 33) implies, argues Coyle, that from the start Stevens' penchant was for presenting "his ideas not as philosophic doctrine but as versions of experience" that are "the fragmentary sources or rudiments of imaginative process" (p. 33). With "Lettres d'un Soldat," a stylistic break from the poem-suites, aphorism suddenly becomes explicit, and so does Stevens' method: each section of the poem offers an aphoristic statement of general meaning, then — the poet having given his desired "anchorage of thought" — we find a poetic response in concrete terms that embodies that general meaning and "charges the aphorisms with that sense of restrained emotion which is the source of their — and the poem's — intensity" (p. 40). Coyle summarizes the pre-*Harmonium* use of aphorism as a "structuring of small independent units in contrapuntal play with one another. . . . Each poem is like a momentary swing of a pendulum. In the continual motion back and forth, in the tension between the fragments of experience, reality appears" (pp. 40 and 41). The early poetry marked by vacillations between impressions and by the overt use of general statement serves as a useful extreme that Coyle employs as a backdrop to demonstrate the increasing sophistication with which Stevens embeds aphorism in his mature poetry.

Stevens' aphoristic techniques after 1917 are then divided into two categories. The first includes the poems generally associated with *Harmonium*, bristling with fustian rhetoric and ironic posturings which enable Stevens to avoid the vacillations of his earliest poetry. His "circular, pedantic bravura" (p. 72) permits him, Coyle continues, to offer and negate ideas simultaneously, thereby implying a more compressed ambivalence towards fictive orders. As always in this book, we discover how whole poems work, and Coyle takes pains to include in her discussions all poetic elements required to grasp an authentic sense of a poem's meaning. Particularly successful in this chapter is her explication of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"; there the function of aphorism leads her to a fine distinction between poetic thought and idea, a point which then enables Coyle to delineate succinctly Stevens' break with the imagists.

The second phase of Stevens' aphoristic technique that Coyle identifies usually is found in the poetry after *Harmonium* — though we are also shown that Stevens used it in "Sunday Morning" — and her conclusions align with most impressions reached of the later poetry. However, we're offered more definitive and detailed remarks on the precise cause for the change in style. Coyle cites a more relaxed, confident voice in this later poetry, and distinguishes the two phases by the formal stance of the first and the informal rehearsal of the second. That commonplace yet confident voice of the later poetry tends to use aphorism either as an epigrammatical spur to concrete images that poetically enact and thereby deepen the original idea, or — as we find in the long poems — the poet arranges aphorisms into a "compendium" (p. 82) of incomplete ideas, an "amassing harmony" of perceptions. Coyle boldly concludes that the imaginative man who composes and discards the truths (aphorisms) of the poem participates in "a simulacrum of the process of thinking, parallel to the process of reality itself" (p. 93).

While the focus of this book never strays, I sometimes found myself wishing that it would. Clearly, her distinction between thought and idea in poetry (p. 46) is a seminal one for Stevens criticism. And what of the shift toward the confident, rehearsal style that produced the "exhilarating sense that what we feel is derived from what we think" (p. 83)? Doesn't that directly assertive voice indicate a shift in idea as well as method of thought? Is this later use of ideas in compendium structure a technique Stevens learned to compress into his very late meditative poetry?

But what restrains Coyle from addressing those issues at length is an admirable insistence on explaining her topic only in the light of how all relevant poetic elements cohere in discrete texts. Because she refuses to simplify poetry in order to serve her thesis, we enjoy a critical study that often reveals Stevens in acts of mind and language that Coyle terms "imperative exhortations." That sense of vigorous pleasure is revealed, too, in Stevens' own phrasing when he remarked that aphorisms supply him with "a refuge from the heights, an anchorage of thought" thus permitting him "a place to spring from" (L 27). Coyle's account of a virile, active Stevens refutes the impression of him created by much criticism today, which often contributes to Frank Lentricchia's assessment that Stevens' attitudes towards ideas lead him to ethical paralysis and thereby mark him as "the champion of nonstatement and corrosive self-meditation" (*After the New Criticism*, p. 241). A poet who revels in the pleasures of a thought revolved and not grasped deserves a critic with an equal capacity to restrain from seizing the apparent solutions that aren't there, and to acknowledge the flickering affirmations that are. We can be grateful that in this book Beverly Coyle matches just that task.

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### **Stanza My Stone: Wallace Stevens and the Hermetic Tradition.**

Leonora Woodman, West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1983.

Wallace Stevens once wrote to José Rodríguez Feo: "I like to live in a classic atmosphere, full of my own gods and to be true to them until I have some better authority than a merely contrary opinion for not being true to them." Especially for those who discover in Stevens a benign atheism, an equivocal spiritual statement such as this portends no critical dilemma; Stevens' "gods" exist outside teleology and their mention need not spark teleological debate. For others, however, his ambivalence indicates a tension, spiritual in tone if not in substance, that pervades his poetry and prose. The vagaries within this dialectic will surely intensify now that Peter Brazeau's *Wallace Stevens Remembered* details the poet's deathbed conversion to Catholicism. It is chilling to consider fresh convolutions to the discussion as Brazeau's informal tidbit transmutes into critical theory. Happily, great poetry outlasts insipid postulates and Stevens' poems will survive the quirky theorizing over whether the venerable post-atheist was in fact the latent poet-Christian.

Tidbits aside, Leonora Woodman's *Stanza My Stone: Wallace Stevens and the Hermetic Tradition* takes a significant scholarly leap toward clarifying essential dimensions within the conflict. Compelling to the depths of its conjecture, Woodman's study underscores a developing ferment: is Stevens' vision exclusively secular or is it sanctioned by transempirical considerations? Not content with the compromising resolution some propose— that we should expect to find no consistency in Stevens' thought in any case— Woodman intends to resolve the central paradox of a poet who subscribes to an objective reality, yet

searches "by a vocabulary reminiscent of mysticism" for the "ultimate poem" or "poem of pure reality." Wishing to reconcile what she calls Stevens' "disconcerting transcendental themes" with his "putative naturalism," Woodman discovers Stevens finally as "a deeply religious poet whose work is as consistent and systematic as any rigorous reader might wish, once we recognize his spiritual purpose."

Sponsoring this recognition, Woodman's study traces an elaborate lineage of Stevens' spiritual heritage. In a 1946 essay, "Rubbings of Reality," the poet alludes to a group of "German pietists" who first settled in 1694 on the banks of the Wissahickon River in eastern Pennsylvania, then gradually migrated to a place less than twenty miles from Stevens' summer retreat in Reading, Pa. Their purpose was to establish a religious community based on a blend of Christian and Hermetic doctrine. Proceeding from evidence she admits to be "entirely circumstantial," Woodman argues the likelihood that "it was this community of gnostics that influenced Stevens' considerable interest in the Hermetic tradition." Through a precise revelation of Hermetism and the practice of alchemy which it elaborates, Woodman surfaces startling correspondences to Stevens' philosophy. Exploring untravelled territory, *Stanza My Stone* provides an entirely fresh geography for Stevens scholarship.

The Hermetic philosophy descends from a collection of sacred treatises, the *Corpus Hermeticum*, attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, the "reputed father" of the alchemical art. Historically, alchemy comprises two distinct levels of operation. In its exoteric or physical tradition, it describes a complicated metamorphosis through which a *prima materia*, the alchemist's base metal, once cleansed of impurities through laboratory technique, achieves a supreme form: gold. More specific to Woodman's study, however, alchemy retains an esoteric or spiritual tradition which links it specifically to the intricate metamorphic procedure by means of which reality, transposed through imaginative energy, becomes poetry. As a spiritual art or "science of God," alchemy describes a "mystical process of self-regeneration performed in the mind and designed to bring about the purification of the soul." According to Hermetic allegory, man descends from a "divine protoplastus," a condition of wholeness defining not a God but, in Stevens' apt terminology, "as a god might be." This primordial "androgyné" both created the universe and was itself the universe it created. Then, disrupted by the Fall, the original, harmonious unity becomes dissonant and tainted; man splits from the divine source and remains disengaged until repurified through spiritual alchemical processes. To the Hermetic alchemist, the theatre in which this dramatic metamorphosis of self-redemption occurs is the human imagination, which is considered the center of psychic power wherein man rejoins "cosmic matter, the ultimate Reality." Casting Stevens' philosophy in this allegorical light, Woodman's thesis and its ramifications are sweeping: "Stevens held a vision of spiritual regeneration which he repeatedly outlined in many of his poems. His subject is not 'natural' man but transcendental man . . . and it belongs to the venerable and well-defined Hermetic tradition which not only nourished his creative genius but gave him an abundant storehouse of image and symbol— even, in many instances, the very architecture of his poems."

Woodman's conclusions compel her toward controversial reconsiderations of major poems and pivotal theories. "Owl's Clover," for instance, since it outlines the alchemical process of spiritual change with such "singleness of purpose," becomes "the central poem of Stevens' work, the poet's fullest testament of faith." The mythological figure Ananke, introduced in the poem's third canto, represents for Woodman "the single most important element of Stevens' thought" because it is Stevens' explicit figure for the primary imagination. The familiar Stevens concepts of major man, central man, and hero become expressions of the transcendental man, or the "human form divine,"

which it is the object of fallen man to regain through alchemical process. "Following the logic of these spiritual assumptions," Woodman writes, "Stevens could properly alternate between imagination and reality, claiming each as 'The only genius' (OP 177, 179) without contradiction, for both imply and involve each other; neither has an existence apart from its correlative."

Clearly, Woodman's views represent a radical departure from the familiar premise that the division between self and world—the seminal thesis in Stevens' vision—is rooted in a post-Cartesian dualism. Woodman delineates instead a monistic vision in which imagination and reality, subject and object, express not opposites but contraries, issuing from a common source within the *unus mundi*. Thus, Stevens' apparent equivocation between god and objective reality is, in fact, consistent with the "vital monism" of the Hermetic vision which "perceives in all matter a spiritual substance yearning for reintegration." Attempting to express the ineffable through language, Stevens experiences the "classic paradox of the mystic." Choosing poetry to effect absorption into universal Being, he places himself in ironic pursuit of a divine reality which, once achieved, must dissolve the distinction between subject and object and thereby obviate the role of art. "Like the guitarist," Woodman observes, "who is 'The maker of a thing yet to be made,' it was Stevens' fate to create the fiction that would ultimately serve in its own annihilation." As in the alchemical rite of purification, poetry involves a decreative/creative process which eventuates, finally, in the disintegration of flawed forms.

If Woodman's study errs, it does so in the direction of presuming sometimes a too literal counterpoise between Stevens and the Hermetic tradition. Profound as her discussion becomes, her thesis hovers finally on a conjectural limb, which is not in any way to demean its relevance. When theorems that should remain theoretical are presented as inevitable, her thesis wilts somewhat under the weight of its premises. After all has been said, however, *Stanza My Stone* presents information and theory which any serious reader of Wallace Stevens will want to know. In this crucial sense, the book is its own elegant justification.

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### **Wallace Stevens and the Idealist Tradition.**

By Margaret Peterson. Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Press. 1983.

This contribution to *Studies in Modern Literature* (a series of published dissertations under the general editorship of A. Walton Litz) admirably ranges from a discussion of the relationship between philosophy and poetry to sensitive explications of obscure poetic details. Focusing on Stevens' central struggle with the dialogue of reality and imagination, Peterson wishes primarily to reveal the poet's "fundamental alliance with the romantic tradition" (pp. 8-9), particularly with Coleridge. She claims, in fact, that Stevens' theory of imagination "is largely indistinguishable from its romantic predecessors" (p. 13), and that critics like Martz have obscured both the epistemological continuities in Stevens' career and the poet's "romantic faith." To develop these assertions Peterson spends several chapters—to her mind, an uncommon proportion—on Stevens' prose. With romantic dichotomies of reality and unreality in place, the author proceeds to trace modern directions of idealism in Richards, Croce, Bergson, James, and Santayana as these thinkers variously touch Stevens' work. The last two chapters turn to the poetry, especially the two long poems, "The Comedian as the Letter C" and "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction." Here

Peterson attempts to “reconstruct” poetic meaning (often with striking specificity) from philosophical contexts and from other poems in the canon.

Having outlined the progression of the book, I feel it necessary to issue an immediate caveat. Although the volume is a “revision of the author’s thesis” (Stanford University, 1965), “revision” apparently did not include reading materials published during the eighteen-year hiatus: its latest item appeared in 1963. As the author argues with Martz’s hedonism to humanism view of Stevens’ development, the reader cannot help wondering what Peterson would think, say, about Frank Lentricchia’s *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), the second chapter of which treats not only issues pertinent to a discussion of Stevens’ metaphysical traditions and speculations, but also the Stevens “vogue” in the decade of Peterson’s dissertation (on p. 30, Lentricchia remarks that “[n]o young academic coming out of graduate school in the middle of the decade with an advanced degree in literature could claim critical sophistication unless he could discourse knowingly, off the cuff, on ‘supreme fictions,’ the ‘gaiety of language,’ and the ‘dialectic of imagination and reason’”).

As for her discussions of the several philosophers, Peterson comes into her own when she turns to William James, whose discourses on pragmatism illuminate meaning in Stevens’ prose and poetry. It does not surprise me that this section was published separately in 1971. Her method of “reconstructing” from James (et. al.) is carried out with a refreshing combination of caution and vigor; “reconstruction” from one poem to another assumes, of course, that the poet works systematically, and the reader wishes here (at times) a slower pace, especially when the fragments fly fast and thick. The interpretation of “The Comedian as the Letter C,” particularly the resolution of object and subject suggested in the poem’s final section, most felicitously repays attention.

Peterson’s success with James (and, less frequently, with Bergson and Santayana) surpasses the Coleridgean foundations of her thesis. The author has good things to say about connections between Kant, Coleridge, and Stevens, but these points never fully or precisely come together, except in occasional over-statements which probably derive in part from the fact that the book is reacting against neglect or denial of Stevens’ romantic debts. I hasten to add, however, that Stevens’ aesthetic concerns are neither simple nor brief, and Peterson is as aware of this as any writer on the subject. Indeed she reminds us that “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” often taken to be Stevens’ final word on realism and idealism, is by no means final.

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